

Something About The Clouds by deathvalleyusa

Series: SATC/BOA (reupload) [1]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy Hargrove Being an Asshole, Child Abuse, Drama, Explicit Sexual Content, F/M, Growing Up, Infidelity, Multi, Romance, Teenage Drama, idr the tags i had sorry, making bad choices, reupload for everyone who asked

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove, Original Female Character(s), Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove/Original Female Character(s)

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-05-05

Updated: 2021-05-05

Packaged: 2022-04-01 01:13:49

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 25

Words: 64,849

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Billy Hargrove finds himself wanting one last thrill before high school is left completely behind. What he wasn't expecting was for that thrill to be Chrissy DiMartino, one of his biggest challenges life will throw at him.

REUPLOAD

1. rumors

Author's Note:

i was asked by a lot of people to reupload this fic series or asking where it went. i feel like enough time between the shitty stuff that happened and now has passed, and i'm ready to let it into the wild again.

News travelled fast in the halls of Hawkins High School. That was for damn sure.

Billy never truly cared about the rumor mill, especially *here* , but this particular morsel had caught his attention enough to listen in on the development throughout the day.

Homeroom : Small whispers of a broken relationship.

4th period : The confirmation of the breakup between Chrissy DiMartino and Dan Weiss. Speculation about who broke up with who ping-ponged across the student body. He had caught a glimpse of Dan, poker faced and cross armed in defense.

Lunch : Chrissy broke up with Dan, not the other way around as everyone thought.

7th period : Dan apparently blew his wad a few too many times for Chrissy's patience, prompting the end of their two-week love affair. Billy found this particularly hilarious.

So, here was Billy Hargrove, watching the clock in anticipation of his freedom and chance to, in layman's terms, nail Chrissy DiMartino.

Chrissy checked off all his boxes; funny, pretty, a great rack, and, frankly, a bit of slut. Unfortunately, that meant timing had never

quite been on their side. A string of boyfriends on her part and a never-ending parade of dates on his meant their availability for each other had never lined up. It was a shame, Billy thought, because every moment they had shared pulsed with energy, flirtations always an inch away from translating into physicality. High school was nearly over, and he couldn't think of a more perfect way to end it than one last conquest.

The seconds before the bell seemed to thin the air. The beats between structured hell and freedom always left him feeling strangled. Blue eyes darted up to the clock, then down to his nearly untouched notebook paper, pencil tapping in his hand.

The bell rang, signaling his time to attack. He had never been one to be first out the door, but the excitement took him. Pushing past the ocean of students, he managed to exchange his school supplies for a softly beaten up jean jacket, slamming his locker door in his rush.

Chrissy wasn't hard to find. Her laugh echoed down the English hallway, a beacon of her presence. A gaggle of friends (of at least one Billy had picked up at a party; it was a small school) surrounding her to hear new tidbits. A hand ran through his hair, fluffing his dirty-blonde curls, as he made his way towards her. Blue eyes locked with her hazel ones, crinkled in a laugh. His presence seemed to light her up. It was something Billy liked about girls like her; no matter how hard they tried their true feelings were easy to read.

"Billy! Hey!" she greeted, pulling herself away from her flock. He couldn't help but give her a quick once over. Slim legs lead up to a ruffled miniskirt (that he could have *swores* she was wearing lace leggings underneath earlier that day) that left a flash of skin visibly sandwiched between it and the cropped sweatshirt hugging her curves. A confident, almost smug smile rested on her face.

"Hey yourself," he grinned back, stopping to leave only a few inches between them. "So what's this I hear about you and Dan being over?"

Manicured fingers tucked a stray lock behind her ear. "Y'know, I thought he was 'the one' but it just wasn't working out like I hoped."

"What, because 'the one' couldn't even look at you without creaming

his pants?" An eruption of giggles came from the peanut gallery.

"*Billy!*" Chrissy swatted at him playfully, an incredulous look on her face. His smile widened at her touch. So the rumors were true about Dan. *Poor bastard.* "So, what brings *you* by? Come to pay your respects?"

"Thought maybe you and I," he said, letting his voice rasp a bit, "could hang out tonight. I'm sure you don't wanna be alone right now."

"I'm actually busy tonight. Gotta study." *Shot down*. She hadn't even taken a beat to think about it.

"I could help. Be moral support or whatever," Billy shrugged. His hand trailed down the length of her arm, smoothing out the wrinkles of her shirt sleeve. The hitch in her breath didn't go unnoticed, nor did the way she suddenly stood a little taller.

"Look, *Billy*." Doe eyes looked up at him, trying to mask any sensation that had come over her seconds before. "I appreciate it but I kinda need time to *heal* after all this. Maybe try tomorrow?"

He let out a chuckle. This chick certainly knew how to go toe-to-toe with him. "You sure I can't at least give you a ride?"

"In your car, or on your...?" The question came so sickly sweet and falsely innocent that her group, who had not filtered away much to his chagrin, burst out in giggles again. Chrissy couldn't seem to hold it together either, her teeth pulling her lower lip in an attempt to hide a grin.

What the hell? Frustration started to bubble up in him, spilling out bit by bit as the peanut gallery continued to laugh at him. That's what they were fucking doing. *Laughing* at his futile attempt to swap spit with their ringleader. His mouth creased into a small frown, eyebrows furrowing. "Jesus, you want the ride or not?"

Chrissy pursed her lips, scanning his face. It seemed she had done enough damage to the collective ego of the male species for today. Eyes rolled as she turned back to her friends to wave goodbye. "Okay,

okay, *jeez* . I want a ride. You don't have to be so touchy."

As they started to walk away, her arm grazing his, he leaned in with a sly grin. His words were barely audible, just enough to put a fire under her ass again. "What if I *want* to get touchy?"

She was silent the rest of the way to the car.

The clicks of seatbelts and purr of the Camaro filled the lull between the two for a few thankful moments. The silence was almost as frustrating as the laughter. Billy shook out a cigarette, offering the crushed pack to his passenger.

"You're an ass, you know," Chrissy finally commented, taking one gingerly by the filter before letting him light it. "Tomorrow, everyone is gonna say I dumped Dan just so I could suck you off in your car or something awful."

"Screw 'em. You know it's not true, so who the hell cares?" He fiddled with the knob of the radio, turning up the station louder. *Girls and their rumor bullshit* . Chrissy had her fair share of nasty gossip directed at her in the few months since his arrival, but it paled in comparison to what some of the girls back home had allegedly done.

The brunette sat quietly, taking drags of her cigarette as she looked out the window at the passing foliage. As they hit a stoplight, she leaned forward and turned the volume way down.

"Why didn't you ask me out sooner?"

Billy looked over to Chrissy with heavy-lidded eyes. She wasn't looking back at him, but at the cigarette in her hands. He wondered if he was going to regret bumming her one. There was one girl who had tried burning his leg after a bad date. He had the proof behind his knee on the leather seat. *Nah*, he thought, *she's no psycho* .

"You always had some guy to hop to next," he replied nonchalantly. "Kinda hard to ask someone on a date if they don't leave room open. Why?"

"I dunno." The cigarette crackled as she took another drag. "It feels like I was last pick. Like a fat kid during kickball."

A tiny smile turned the corners of his mouth upward as the light turned green. There it was. *Jealousy*. Not that she had much to be jealous about when it came to how the rest of the high school girls stacked up against her.

"Well, I'm asking now."

"And I told *you* to try again tomorrow."

"And if I ask tomorrow, you gonna say yes?" He glanced over, catching Chrissy's gaze for a moment before focusing back on the road.

"Hmm," she smiled. "You'll definitely have better odds tomorrow than you did today. Probably even better odds the day after."

"C'mon," he groaned, "why am *I* the guy who has to jump through all the fuckin' hoops?"

"Because you're like me. You like a challenge." Within a moment, her hand was resting on his thigh, her chest pressing into his arm. White, hot electricity surged through him, a dull pang hitting his lower stomach. "You *do* like a challenge, right, Billy?"

He had stopped, finally at her destination. Her face was inches away from his, the look he had a glimpse of earlier in the hall in full force. Every feature of her face was in full view; her fading freckles, the deep cupid's bow of her lips, deep set eyes carefully brushed with shimmer and deep plum. Billy leaned in, lips parted to receive hers, only feeling them graze against one another before her hands pushed him away softly. The click of her seatbelt brought him fully back from the moment, watching her put out her cigarette and grabbed her bag.

"Tease," Billy breathed.

"Try again tomorrow," she encouraged again, arms resting on the top of the Camaro. "This was fun. Drive safe!"

She slammed the door shut before he had the chance to retort.

“You like a challenge, right, Billy?” he mocked, putting the car in drive again, feeling the roar of the engine as his foot hit lead.
“Gimme a fuckin’ break.”

2. personal chauffeur

Billy had come to the conclusion that Chrissy was a fucking liar.

He was not a patient person by any means, but he had spent the last few weeks attempting some sort of courtship to receive that touch he had thought long and deeply about into the night after he dropped her off. Everyone assumed at this point they had done *something*, but Princess Puts Out had locked her box under an impenetrable chastity belt and he was suffering for it.

Leaning against the Camaro, he looked off into the distance, eyes obscured by his aviators. Hawkins was nothing but distances, patches of leafless trees and brown grass pocked by white that marked the relatively mild January. He fucking hated snow. Hated being pale, hated being cooped up, and above all, hated being reminded that he was stuck in this hick town with a girl he had put way too much effort into without results.

He'd drive her home a few nights a week (her stepdad apparently wouldn't buy her a car despite a fat ol' bonus check she had seen), hang around her in between classes or parties when his own friends weren't hovering over him. Anything to wait for her to *finally* give the signal, let him make a move. The signal never came, no matter how often she seemed to promise it.

He'd begun to notice her calling his house more and more, asking for assignments even though she knew he didn't do them. Posing stupid, pointless questions in an attempt to keep him on the line long enough to actually let it morph into a conversation, to let it devolve into laughter over a stupid comment. Hell, she had even spoken to Max and Susan a few times. Burrowing herself deeper into the fabric of his life.

Speaking of Max.

"Where is that little shit?" he muttered, scanning the lazy slope of the middle school for the redhead. His threats of making her walk home had now become empty with the arrival of winter, and she seemed to understand that. Getting a belt to the back or more of his shit

destroyed or thrown out wasn't worth it anymore. None of it seemed worth it. Billy was bound by the whims of a middle schooler, a complete tease, and *fucking Neil*. Good riddance to all three, when the time came.

He felt the bump of another body against his side, the rustle of a polyester jacket against metal as it leaned on his car. Billy produced a pack of Reds, taking a cigarette before wordlessly offering it to Chrissy. Every few days she gave him a couple dollars for a pack that she could bum off, and nearly every afternoon she lit one, shoulder to shoulder with the blonde. An almost comforting routine.

"Of course she decides to be late the one day it's absolutely freezing," Chrissy bristled, taking a long drag.

"You could find a different ride, you know," Billy snapped back, his face set hard with annoyance. The horny bits and the angry bits of adolescent hormones had all reared their head today after the realization he hadn't got any in several weeks. Chrissy just happened to be the cause and the target.

"And miss out on watching you drive into a snowbank again? Not a chance." She scooted a little closer, sapping some of his body heat for her own. "Can we *please* sit in the car? I'm dying."

Billy grunted, scooting her aside to open the driver's side. The familiar slam of both doors came, relief hitting both high schoolers as the heat kicked in.

"Hey."

"What."

"You mad at me or something?"

He snorted, leaning forward onto the steering wheel. "Nope."

"You are so full of it," she huffed, sliding down the seat. "Such a spazzoid."

"Gee, Chris," he shot back, his tongue feeling the space between his teeth and his upper lip. "Maybe making me your personal chauffeur

without even letting me get to *first base*, which I'm pretty sure you never intend to happen, sucks total ass at this point."

A hard look came over her face. Billy was watching her, waiting for the explosion that he assumed would come after his word vomit. Instead, she blinked a few times, trying to hold tears at bay, zipped up her coat, and wordlessly left the Camaro with a slam of the door.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath, turning off the car to follow her. "Chris! Hey! Come back!"

"No," she retorted, walking towards the road towards the direction of her house.

Goddammit. The crunch of snow beneath his bike boots only served to annoy him more. "Chrissy, what the hell are you doing? *Stop*."

Stop she did, much to Billy's relief. The relief only lasted a second as she turned to him, shooting him a death glare he had only seen once or twice.

"What does it look like? I'm walking home, dickweed."

He couldn't help but let out an incredulous laugh. "You can't be fucking serious."

She was definitely serious.

A frustrated yell left him, kicking the mix of snow and gravel under his feet. If he made it fast enough back to the car, he'd catch her, apologize, whatever the hell she wanted and then go back to waiting for Max to show her stupid face.

Max waiting at the car. Of course she was standing at the goddamn car, huddled in her new coat Susan couldn't stop fauning over and the stupid earmuffs her idiot boyfriend had given her for Christmas. Before she could even ask where he had been, he opened the door and turned over the engine. The frustration finally boiled over, anger seething in his words. "Get. In. The. Car. Back seat."

"Why do I get the back seat? Chrissy isn't even—"

“Just shut up and get in the back seat. Move it.”

The deafening hum of the engine as it ripped down Cherry Street was almost meditative, trance-like. He scanned the sides of the road, hoping he could catch her before she turned down the main drag.

“You made her mad, didn’t you?” Max spoke up, peering out the window, looking for any sign of Chrissy’s canary-yellow jacket.

“None of your business. Just look.”

“Must’ve been bad if she didn’t want a ride home.” A sigh came from the back seat as the leather creaked. “Too bad. She was gonna lend me one of her belts.”

“Just. Look.” Billy’s jaw had set, staring ahead. “When we find her, you keep your mouth shut, you hear me?”

It didn’t take long. Max spotted her first. With the cold, Chrissy had been moving at a quick pace, but still not fast enough to outpace a car. He pulled up close to her, the engine dying down to a soft hum as he followed her pace. Her face was still stone, barely acknowledging she had been caught.

“Chrissy, get in.”

“Get bent,” she said back.

“You’re gonna get frostbite.”

“Seriously, Chrissy, get in,” Max piped up, sticking her head out the window. “It’s too far to walk right now.”

Chrissy stopped, her face softening slightly at the sight of Max. Billy couldn’t understand her soft spot for the redhead. She was a shitty middle schooler, a piece of what made his life hell. Maybe it was the Harrington effect; you get close to his friend circle, you suddenly become a kid-magnet.

“Fine. But I’m sitting in back.”

“Whatever,” he muttered, waiting for the two to swap spots. “I’m

dropping Max off first, we gotta talk."

"I don't *want* to talk to you." A thud against his seat, definitely a boot and not a knee from the feel, punctuated her answer. He glared at her through the rear view mirror, opting not to say anything, lest she kick him again and get whatever grime from her shoes on his baby.

When they screeched up to the familiar curb on Cherry Street, the seething, uncomfortable silence that had engulfed the car hung thick in its unmoving state. The locks clicked open, prompting a look from Max to Billy.

"Tell Susan and Neil I'll be back in an hour," he ordered, craning his neck back to look at Chrissy, who had perched herself with arms crossed across the back seat. She glared back. Max made no movement.

"I said get out!" he snapped turning to shoot daggers at Max. Her eyes locked with his, a familiar frightened look on her face. This time, it seemed to say, *Don't hurt her*. It only further pissed him off. He just wanted to talk to the girl in the back. He wasn't fucking *Neil*, waiting for an opportunity to rope another person into his secret terror. He just. Wanted. To. Talk. "Max, let Chrissy out so she can sit up front."

Max climbed out, ready to obey. Chrissy gave her a look just as commanding as his before turning back to meet his gaze. "I'm good back here."

"Oh. Okay," Max replied in a small voice. "I'll see you, Chrissy."

"Bye, Max," the brunette answered, never taking her eyes off him.

The ride to her house was only a few minutes, but Billy had purposefully chosen to drive under the speed limit this time. He needed any time he could get.

Billy was not a person who apologized. Susan and Neil (and Max on occasion) got the hollow words to placate them, but he rarely meant it when it did come from his mouth. What was there to apologize for? He lived how he wanted, said what he thought, and damn anyone who wasn't comfortable with that. So this... this was foreign.

Uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry," he said, breaking the silence between them. "I'm sorry I said that earlier... the first base thing."

No answer. He decided to keep going, hoping something would stick.

"Look, it's been annoying waiting for you to come around, and as cool as hanging out has been, I haven't gotten any in, like, almost a month and it's got me frayed, y'know?" He couldn't help the tiniest bit of edge to his voice, no matter how hard he was trying to be nice right now. A look into his rear view mirror, and Chrissy's face and body had softened, her arms still crossed in an attempt to guard herself.

Silence filled the Camaro again until the next stop light. The squeak of leather came from behind, with Chrissy's head, then body, emerging from the back seat to plant itself next to him with a grunt. She grabbed his hand, threading her fingers through the spaces in his own. Letting their clasped hands fall by the gear stick, he sucked in a breath and continued to drive. He wasn't the hand holding type. Too delicate, too personal.

"Don't ever talk to me like that again," she said. He could tell she still was angry, but her words sounded wounded more than anything.

"Yeah." He squeezed her hand gently, prompting a squeeze back. The rate at which high school relationships broke and mended felt like whiplash sometimes. "I won't."

Snow crunched under the tires as they finally pulled up to her house. Chrissy sat unusually still, looking at their still-joined hands. Billy didn't want to pull away, hesitant to let his apology seem less genuine.

"You still want a ride tomorrow?" He tried to sound nonchalant, calm in the face of this tornado of emotion he had whipped up.

"Didn't think you'd want to still drive me around," she said, a choked laugh gripping her words.

"And have you miss me driving into a snowbank again? Fat chance," he grinned taking back his hand slowly. It landed somewhere just

above her knee, teasing the fraying hole in her jeans.

Chrissy seemed unable to tear her eyes away from his fingers, her breath hitching. "Actually, you wanna go do something tomorrow? Just us?"

"You're serious?"

"Least I can do for you putting up with my theatrics." She rested her hand on top of his wrist, rubbing her thumb in circles. "That's what Wes calls it when he thinks I'm being a drama queen. Theatrics."

Billy snorted. Good ol' stepdaddy Wes. "Speaking of Wes, he's staring at us from the window."

Chrissy turned her head, pushing Billy's hand away as she saw her stepfather watching them, a unamused look on his face. Billy flashed a smile, one of those big, all-American cherub grins that parents seemed to adore, and waved with his now unoccupied hand.

"*Shit*, I gotta motor. He'll want to give me some lecture about personal space again." Grabbing her bag as she got out, she paused to give Billy a small smile. "Call me later? I got some breaking information on the Nancy/Jonathan situation."

"Yeah." His smile relaxed as he slid back into the seat. "Sure."

She mouthed the word 'bye' to him, hauling ass to the front door, where Wes was waiting, already jumping on his 'hands where I can see them' lecture.

Not a liar, he concluded. *But still a tease.*

3. who you are

Max bounced her leg against her knee, sprawled out on her bed while the radio droned out a Eurythmics tune. Nervous energy threatened to consume her, the car ride home playing over in her mind. Her mom had been the only one home when she shot through the door, trying to keep an exterior of calm. The confusion and slight worry on her mom's face as Max dutifully told her Billy had dropped her off only served to heighten the anxiety building.

Don't hurt her, she had pleaded internally before she was kicked out of the car. The phrase looped in her head; perhaps if she thought it loud enough, he'd hear it. She'd never felt the intensity between Billy and another girl before. It was the same feeling that threatened to explode in their house every time Neil and Billy were in the same room. Uncomfortable silence, uncertainty in the face of two turbulent personalities.

She hoped the gut feeling that shot a scared look at Billy was wrong. He seemed to really like Chrissy's company, and it lifted the whole mood of the house whenever he returned from time with her. But, it was Billy, someone who antagonized her mom for the hell of it, who still would call Max stupid and 'accidentally' get rid of the love notes she and Lucas passed between themselves. A person so involved in tearing apart other's small happiness that it was likely he'd do the same to his own without thinking about it.

Copper hair swung around her shoulders as she hefted herself off the bed, scuffling across the carpet to the kitchen. As the fridge door swung open, her mother's soft voice came from the living room.

"I'm starting dinner soon, honey. Don't fill up too much."

"I won't." Max grabbed a soda and made her way to her room.

"Max, come sit, please?" She had turned to face her daughter, a hopeful look in her eyes. Max almost always listened to her, and it was the reprieve of the poor woman who had dealt with Billy's rebellion for years. With a tiny sigh, Max joined her mom on the couch, sinking into the floral cushion. The hiss of carbonation

escaping the aluminum can joined the awkward pause and the bubbly instructions of Julia Child. Max noted dryly to herself that no matter how many times her mom watched the program, she never seemed to get better at cooking.

“How was school?”

“Fine.” Max knew the one word answer wouldn’t be enough. She racked her brain for any news that would placate her mom. “We tried building a slide out of the snow during recess, but when Mike got on it and it completely fell apart. Totally fell on his ass— *butt* .”

“So nothing bad? You seemed upset when you came in.”

What could Mom even do if Max told her about the car ride? Comfort her? Make an empty promise to talk to Billy one on one, but go to Neil instead? *Nothing useful* , she thought. *Nothing that doesn’t get all of us in trouble* .

“Mom, it’s nothing. I just have a lot of homework, it put me in a bad mood,” she replied. “You know how it is.”

The other redhead nodded, running her hand through Max’s waves. Sometimes her mom seemed to breeze through the hours of their home life, never truly taking notice or giving enough attention to the feelings of the children in the household. And then, there were times like this, where she just *knew* , didn’t press, and just was there for Max. “If you say so, honey. Why don’t you finish up your homework, then we can do a puzzle together after dinner with no distractions.”

“Sounds good.”

By the time Billy crashed through the door, Max had calmed down. She had camped out on the couch surrounded by textbooks. Susan was extremely occupied with whatever roast she was about to dry the hell out of.

Max whipped her head to look at her step-brother, scanning his face and body language for any answer. His face twitched to its usual annoyed, heavy lidded glare.

“Is he...?” Billy asked in a low voice, eyes flitting around to the doors.

Neil .

“Nope. Just mom,” Max assured, shaking her head. “Is Chrissy—?”

“We talked, like I said we were gonna.” Max felt a wave of relief, then a small pang of guilt. He took off his coat and started heading into his room. “She’s still pissed, but I guess we’re going out tomorrow.”

She couldn’t help but follow him, hoping he’d give some clarity to the scene she had been stuck in earlier. Billy’s room reeked of cigarettes, clothes thrown haphazardly in piles instead of his hamper. It was always a marvel being in his room, always something new to look at on his walls or a Where’s Waldo of half-empty liquor squirreled away for loitering in parking lots. His name in Chrissy’s handwriting, scrawled on the front of an elaborately folded piece of notebook paper sat on the bedside table. Max wondered what she wrote, if he had written her back.

“What?” he demanded. “You know my room is off limits, shitbird.”

“Why was she so mad?” It was a simple question that Max could probably answer herself. Billy was an asshole, and he always found a way to piss people off.

“I said something I shouldn’t have, that’s all.” The answer was curt. He grabbed whatever issue of Hard Rock was closest and settled on his bed, determined to ignore her.

“Like what?” she quizzed. She’d overheard him and his rude, freckled friend Tommy talk about Chrissy on the few days Billy hung out at home. Any of the words Tommy used were enough to make Max bristle. If Billy had called her any of those, Chrissy would’ve probably castrated him.

“If you care that much, you can ask her yourself,” he replied, flipping the page. “It’s fine now, so just drop it, Max.”

Her fingers drummed on the doorframe before sliding to the arm of the beaten up loveseat, avoiding any of his clothes that littered the backrest and cushion. He shot her a glance, one that wasn’t the usual

annoyed, bordering on angry glare that came when she entered his space. It was calmer; wary, almost tired.

“Look,” he sighed, leaning his head against the wall. “You and that Sinclair kid —”

“Lucas.”

“Lucas, whatever. You get in fights all the time. This is the same shit. It never ends, it just gets more complicated the older you get.”

“Good to know, I guess,” she offered, swaying her feet. “So you finally got your date?”

“Shut up.”

“Where are you gonna take her? The Hardee’s parking lot to drink beer?”

“Seriously, why are you still here?” he snapped. “And fuck no. She said she was gonna choose.”

Max caught herself before she laughed. This conversation was already pushing the boundaries of any positive socializing Billy allowed between them. “You’re probably gonna have to go ice skating or something stupid. I think she’s got you whipped.”

An empty, crushed beer can soared past her head, hitting the mantle of the unused fireplace behind her. She flinched, seeing Billy’s previously calm demeanor slowly give way to the snide smile and glint in his eyes.

Yeah, she thought, that was too much .

“That was a warning shot. Get out or the next one hits you square in the head.” She hated how eerily calm his voice got when the flip switched in him. His arm reached over for another can, rolling back in a pitcher’s throw.

“Okay! I’m going!” she exclaimed, jumping up from the couch. “Hope you don’t screw up again tomorrow.”

As she slammed his door shut, she heard the thud of aluminum against the wood. Thankfully, Neil hadn't heard it from their parents' room, but her mom gave Max a questioning look. Max just shrugged, going back to her homework. Some things were worth keeping to yourself in this house.

4. burning up

Do I wanna go out with a lion's roar?

Yeah, I wanna go south and get me some more

Hey, they say that a stitch in time saves nine

They say I better stop or I'll go blind

Oop she bop she bop

The clack of acrylic bangles against each other almost fell in line with the drum beat blasting on her portable radio. Chrissy stood still long enough to swipe shimmering coral lipstick on. Her lips rubbed together, popping apart into a pleased smile. She leaned forward, shimmying her breasts farther into the cups under her shirt to get as much cleavage as possible. It was a trick she learned from a friend's older sister as an alternative to tissue stuffing back when she still looked prepubescent. She took a few seconds to admire her handiwork before teasing out her hair a bit more, intent on making the volume last through the day.

Her preening was interrupted by pounding on the door. She gave an acknowledging glance, rolling her eyes before returning to her masterpiece.

"Christina, there are other people who live here that require the facilities," came Wes' exasperated, muffled voice.

"Yeah, I'm still working on my hair, Wes," she called back, turning up the radio.

"Your life isn't going to end if your hair isn't perfect. Now get out or your date's not happening tonight."

Crap . Being torn between high school societal expectations and a night she had been fantasizing about for the past few weeks was not a great place for her to be. With a frustrated yell, she put down her

comb and turned off the radio, whipping the door open.

Wes was not an imposing man, but he was taller than her by almost six inches and had mastered the dad glare that usually had enough effect to shut her up. He stepped aside, eyebrows raised. "The actress finally leaves her dressing room, how wonderful."

"You're such a *bummer*," she whined, walking past in a huff. "If you had let me get that vanity for my room for my birthday, this wouldn't even be an *issue* —"

"Less theatrics, more going downstairs. Your bus will be here in ten minutes and you haven't eaten yet," he sighed, closing the door to the bathroom.

Gathering her belongings from her bedroom, Chrissy glanced at a Polaroid someone had taken at a recent party, '*Chris and Billy, '84*' scribbled at the bottom in permanent marker. Her legs wrapped around his bare torso — *it never seemed like he kept a shirt on for long at parties* — arms hugging his shoulders gently as his own wrapped around her, supporting her weight. His hair was even more of a curly mess than usual, eyes bleary from the booze and the bud. Her hair was falling out of its high ponytail, same blissed out look on her freckled face. He was grazing her jaw with his lips, embarrassingly bright pink from the exchange of flurry of kisses she could remember leading up to the picture.

Chrissy felt a pang of hurt wash over her again, remembering his words yesterday. They were both drunk, but he had apparently forgotten this particular night. How she had let him have a taste of things to come, how comfortable his lips felt against hers.

She'd have to find room on the corkboard for it later. Hopefully, also tell him about that Saturday when the hurt and anger wasn't so fresh. Right now she had a bus to catch.

Walking into Hawkins High before the first bell rang, one would be greeted by an almost chaotic atmosphere. Teens shouting and laughing, all walks of life cohabitating in stark white halls decorated in posters beckoning stragglers to extracurriculars and warning against drug use.

Chrissy and her friends tended to hang out in the hallway that held the English classrooms. The teachers in their spot were generally okay with their nonsense and it was a great spot to people watch and send gossip out into the student body.

She never considered herself popular in the traditional sense, but she also wasn't at the level of infamy like some of the other girls in the school. Generally liked by the majority of the school, but also the subject of some of the most vile shit when she pissed one of the big leagues off. Since sophomore year, she *apparently* had contracted a few varieties of VD, had gotten pregnant twice, and, during one bizarre month, had apparently died when she had actually been in the hospital with pneumonia.

Chrissy took it all in stride now, dishing it right back, sometimes so callously she felt guilt tighten her whole chest. She struck the first proverbial blow now when it came to the men that flitted in and out of her life. It was hollow, meaningless bullshit, but it was how you survived.

The girls were in the middle of a riveting debate on whether Duran Duran or Wham! deserved to be in the top 3 weeks ago on MTV when Annette, Chrissy's closest friend, shot her a look, biting her lip as her eyes looked past Chrissy.

An arm draped over her shoulder, the weight of Billy's torso leaning into hers. His jaw rested gently on top of her head, pressing into her teased waves. Chrissy felt a slight flush rise to her cheeks.

"Morning ladies," he greeted. "Gotta steal your leader for a sec."

"Billy—" Before she had the chance to protest, she was being guided towards a more private line of lockers. At least, they were private for conversation; Annette and the girls could clearly see everything, watching and whispering. Not that Chrissy minded. As soul-crushing

as the rumor mill could be, she thrived with the attention and notoriety Billy brought, and he knew it.

"*Totally* unnecessary, by the way. That's like the least smooth you could've been," she said, the words tumbling between giggles. She let her hand rest on his upper arm, leaning back on the metal lockers to take in the full view of his near-angelic features with a grin.

"Huh, so last night's call *did* put you in a good mood today like I said it would," he chuckled, scanning her face. "Was it the thing about the alphabet or the thing about my fing—"

Her hand flew up to cover his mouth, heart thumping so hard she could feel it in her ears.

They had talked longer than normal last night after their fight. Chrissy thought it was another olive branch from Billy, who wasn't much of a phone person. He let her drone on about gossip, chiming in with conflicting stories he had heard. They'd somehow ended up on the subject of her last unfortunate boyfriend, Dan. How unsatisfying the entire ordeal had been. How Billy could, in his words, make her forget Dan even existed.

That night she thanked God she had gotten her own phone line for Christmas instead of a car. The things promised to her body, the sounds of shifting and heavy, ragged breathing on the line... had her parents heard, she would be sent to a convent, never to be seen again.

"Both," she replied, her voice unbothered but her face turning a brighter shade of pink. After they had hung up, she had thrown on some Prince and spent a good hour putting everything she had heard Dr. Ruth talk about regarding self love to the test.

Billy laughed into her hand, thoroughly satisfied by the rise he had got out of her. A soft kiss planted on her palm as he pried it away from his face.

She resented how easy it was for him to play the Don Juan, to slip into different facades to get what he wanted. Perhaps that's why she had held out for so long with him since that first car ride home. She

was tired of being fed an image; he'd eventually crack and she'd be the one to cause it. She'd be there to see his real face. Just like Dan. Just like every last one of the boys that had wanted her.

You like a challenge, don't you Billy? Because I fucking live for them.

“You *really* want to go bowling?”

“You got a better idea?” She honestly didn’t have a better one. Hawkins had few amusements, especially during the winter months. Chrissy wasn’t about to repeat the various tales other girls had told of hanging out in parking lots or spending the entire time hotboxing in his car. A mall was slated to open in April, but until then, they had to make due.

Billy shrugged, tilting his head to look her up and down in the lazy, unobtrusive way he had perfected. “Word of warning, I haven’t gone in years. So, no telling anyone if I get a shit score.”

“That’s fine,” Chrissy grinned, arms folding in front of her chest. “Just means I can gloat when I kick your ass.”

The metallic tremolo of the first bell rang out, causing the girls who had been watching Chrissy and Billy to scatter. Billy’s gaze drifted to the direction of the noise before settling back on her.

“Guess the trash talk has to wait for later.”

“Guess so.”

The beat between the last words felt like it swallowed everything, the halls feeling empty even as it ebbed with students. Billy leaned in, planting a kiss on her lips as a hand slid down her hip. He seemed to pulsate through her, the knot in her stomach growing. Chrissy pressed harder against his lips, letting her hands meander under his jacket to grasp the fabric of his button down. Small, hurried kisses bloomed, a culmination of the seeds planted and the explosion of heat between them. Billy pulled away a bit. Chrissy felt every inch of her body protest the horrible injustice.

“Hey. If you win tonight,” he breathed, his nose grazing hers, “how ‘bout you’ll get a *special* prize from me.”

“And if I lose?” she whispered, barely audible to anyone besides him and whatever god had created him.

“Trust me, you won’t.”

Chrissy bit her lower lip, letting her head rest on his chest. If he was anywhere as good as his raspy, detailed descriptions on the phone, it’d be a victory to remember the rest of her life.

A deep voice cleared their throat, hitting a lesson book on the side of the lockers. “Hey, Hargrove, DiMartino! You two know the rules: no PDA on school campus. Get to class.”

Graphite squeaked quietly on the laminated particle board as Billy doodled on his desk. His face was mashed into his palm, lashes almost completely obscuring the fact that he was awake. Baby blues boredly followed his No. 2 on the wood grain, back and forth.

Neil now had the habit of calling the school randomly to see if he had cut any of his major classes that day, so his time for smoke breaks and socializing was left for study hall and lunch. He’d actually gotten relatively lucky, having one after the other *and* a teacher who let them do basically whatever they wanted as long as it didn’t cause bodily harm. Tommy H. was there, but unfortunately so was Steve Harrington. He at least provided a bit of entertainment for the two boys in the lulls in conversation.

Tommy was prattling on about whatever strife his bitch girlfriend Carol had caused him this week. Billy had stopped listening about a minute in. Relationship drama was all anyone ever talked about, the lack of outside stimulation severely lacking in the town an obvious cause. Hell, he’d take listening to these hicks talk about trackers or corn or whatever shit they were into over this.

“Anyway, Carol said she saw you and Chris getting hot and heh-vay before homeroom today,” Tommy smirked. “What, the bedroom not

good enough for you two kids anymore?"

Fucking Carol .

"Oh, y'know, expanding our boundaries. Gotta keep it fresh so the girls don't get bored and hop in bed with the class goth." He reached to the side, smacking Steve on the arm playfully. The former king of Hawkins' eyes flitted up, annoyed, before returning to whatever he was working on. "Right, Harrington?"

"Get bent, Hargrove," was the distracted answer.

Tommy cackled, prompting a warning from Mr. Dwyer. He turned his attention back to Billy, who was still smirking over the burn he just gave Harrington. "So she finally gave it up?"

"What?"

"Chris. She finally let you tap that?"

"Nah." If anyone figured out that it'd taken this long just to get her to make out, he'd be sitting at the loser table with *Harrington* for the rest of his existence in this hellhole. "Pretty sure that's on the itinerary for tonight though."

"No shit? She's held out long enough on you. Plus, she owes you for totally burning you yesterday in the parking lot," the freckled teen grinned.

Billy winced. "Shit, how many people saw that?"

"Not a lot, but enough, dude. What'd you do?"

"Nothing," he stated, internally wincing. He hoped if his words reached Chrissy, she'd have the understanding that reputations were at stake. "Said something and she took it the wrong way, like chicks do."

Tommy shrugged, attempting to balance a pencil on his upper lip. "I wouldn't put up with it her, man. Chrissy's a great piece of ass but she's got a mean streak. Right, Harrington?"

Billy's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, slowly connecting his gaze to Steve's.

"That was, like, 6th grade, Tommy," he protested. "It doesn't count. We 'dated' for like half a school day and then she broke up with me through a note."

"Yeah, and she told everyone you slobber when you kiss. See? Been mean since 6th grade," Tommy said simply.

Billy couldn't help but burst out laughing as Steve rolled his eyes, looking back down at his book. *Guess she's always been a firecracker*, he thought smugly. "I'm pretty sure I can handle her, Tommy."

"Look man, as great as she seems, I'm telling you. She's incapable of feeling anything with something other than her vagina."

The image of himself swinging a fist in Tommy's putrid face flashed in his head, the memory of how *good* it felt to beat Harrington's face mingling with the desire to replicate the results twice over with the asshole in front of him. *Not now*, he thought. But the first fucking chance Tommy gave him, he was going to break more than his nose.

Instead, he lashed out a hand, gripping Tommy's polo hard enough to pull the other teen forward. The desk screeched across the linoleum, prompting a concerned look from the other classmates and Mr. Dwyer. Billy's eyes darkened with intensity, the fully open glare that had given him a reputation for being a total wild card.

"You say anything like that again," he said calmly, "and Carol's not going to be able to recognize your sorry ass."

"Boys!" Mr. Dwyer called out, standing up to make his way to them. "Do I have to separate you?!"

Billy released Tommy with a push, prompting him to skid a bit backwards. The look of sheer terror on his face told the blonde his words had been heard loud and clear.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Harrington, taking it all in with a tiny, satisfied smile before he returned to his homework.

5. hazy images

Honestly, it was kind of gross seeing Billy and Chrissy make out for the first time. Max wasn't sure if they had just been more discreet before or if this was a new development, but rolling up to the Camaro this afternoon was a gag-worthy moment. She had made sure to voice her displeasure with gusto.

The thing was, she didn't get it. She understood the fluttering in her heart when she kissed Lucas, the overwhelming need to be attached at the hip. The rest of it hadn't quite *clicked*, no matter how many articles she had read in various *Cosmos* snuck from her mom's magazine caddy. Sex seemed unnecessary and another complication to liking another person that she didn't want to have any part of.

They had been home for a few hours, Billy holed up in his landfill of a room and Max clipping out posters of Ratt and Ralph Macchio from 16 Magazine. Neil and her mom were watching the news in the living room. Everyone had their own bubble, their own space to exist without acknowledging the others did. She liked nights like this. It was almost normal. Taking a few pieces of tape, she started to fill in the bits of her wall collage.

Her handiwork was interrupted by several thuds on her door.

"Hold on," she answered, smoothing out the glossy paper.

The answer was just more thuds, followed by Neil's loud, aggravated voice and Billy's slightly closer one.

"*Jesus*, just come in!" she snapped, grabbing another picture. The longer the two of them were in the same room, the more likely the night was going to devolve into madness.

Billy swung the door open, a dour look on his face. His hair was damp and matted down to his head, water droplets falling on his ribbed tank top. The two of them stared at each other for a bit before Billy started to get annoyed. "What?"

Max raised her eyes, before turning back to her task. “You’re the one who knocked. You tell me.”

He tossed something her way, a strong enough motion to make her flinch slightly. After the beer can yesterday, she couldn’t take any chances. Making her way to the edge of her bed, she peered at it. An elastic rainbow belt with a metal butterfly buckle clasp nestled into her flowered comforter.

“Chrissy said you wanted to borrow it,” Billy explained, pushing curls out of his face. “She grabbed it when I dropped her off since she didn’t think she’d remember to when I pick her up tonight.”

“Thanks,” she responded, tracing her finger along the ridges of the butterfly’s detail. She glanced behind her step-brother, watching the back of Neil’s head. “Hey, shut the door?”

Billy’s face flinched into confusion and then realization at what she was getting at. He shuffled into the room, letting the door click close softly. Max realized just how foreign his person felt in her space today, how the rage that usually followed his intrusions notably absent. She thought he felt it too; his body language was less confident, more uncomfortable by his surroundings.

“You think Neil’s still going to let you go out tonight?” she asked softly, settling on her bed. “He seemed pretty on edge earlier.”

“He’s got no reason not to.” Billy moved closer, leaning against the baseboard of her bed. “It’s just a hissy fit. Worse case scenario, he locks me out of the house again.”

Max looked down, fiddling with the belt. She remembered the night Neil had first enacted that punishment here in Hawkins. Hearing Billy pounding on the front door, the hurried steps and crunching of dead brush as he made his way around the house in a frenzied attempt to get out of the barely 40-degree weather. Neil refusing to let her or her mom intervene. “Is that why you have the blanket in the back?”

“Among other reasons.”

“Ugh, *barf*. Please tell me you at least wash it.”

"I'm not an animal."

"Could of fooled me. You look like a wet dog."

"And you know what wet dogs do?" he grinned, leaning over. Max's eyes widened, unsure of what his next move accompanying the cheeky grin would be. His head shook back and forth, hair whipping the retained moisture all over her and her comforter.

"Billy! Stop!" Max squealed, hands pushing against his shoulders in an attempt to save her bed. Laughter started to punctuate her shrieks as he started head-banging, the onslaught of water droplets still flying.

Max finally found the strength to push him away, falling back on her bed. She gasped for air, staccato laughs punctuating each breath. Her ears picked up a deeper chuckle coming from Billy's direction. Behind the curtain of damp curls, his eyes creased to join a smile — a *genuine* smile — as he let the last vestiges of his own laughter trail away.

She'd seen this Billy a handful of times in the past. Mostly when they were much younger, when both of them had attempted to foster some sort of us-against-the-world sibling relationship. At some point, the laughter was gone and they both stopped trying.

Billy clicked his tongue, the unfamiliar energy between him and Max sinking in. Neither of them, Max realized, knew how their relationship was supposed to look like untainted by anger and resentment and fear.

"I gotta get ready," he finally said, making his way to the door. It swung open, Neil and her mom both looking into Max's room with uncertainty.

"Hey, Billy?"

"Hm?"

"Have a good time."

He lifted his eyebrows, giving a soft snort before closing the door behind him.

6. baby, i'm no match

February had meandered its way in, the unusually mild temperature continuing while the citizens of Hawkins held their breath. Billy loved it; it meant that his birthday would hopefully allow for whatever ruckus he wanted to cause on a whim. It also meant that tonight he would have to think less about how to keep warm and more about how to finally get Chrissy to fully let loose with him.

The door swung open, and Billy stood tall, a lazy smile on his face. He'd pulled out the stops tonight, hair fluffed and hairsprayed to the high heavens, shirt buttons undone to just below his sternum paired with his least-beat up leather jacket. An adult's worst nightmare. He loved watching girls' parents rattled expression as they realized what kind of boys lurked at the high school. The power behind it.

But tonight, Billy was not trying to mess with someone else's parents, nor was he trying to leave a bad impression. No impression would actually be glorious. A complete lack of proof that he existed in this town meant he could keep doing as he pleased.

"Hey, Mrs. DiMartino. I'm here to pick Chris up." Polite. Eyes sparkling, smiling. No hint of a threat to her daughter's supposed moral integrity.

"Billy, yes," her mother perked up, ushering him inside. "She's still upstairs fiddling around, I'll have her father call her down. You come sit, warm up a bit."

His bottom had barely hit the seat when he heard the call and return of Chrissy and her stepdad, yelling up and down the stairs. A small snort came as Chrissy seemed to overpower him with a string of aggravated one word answers, and then an unintelligible argument. Neil wouldn't be caught dead letting his children talk to him like this without severe consequences. Susan wouldn't even bother putting up a fight like that. The scene was so stupidly normal; a pang of envy echoed in him.

The thunder of feet down the stairs gave him reprieve from his thoughts. She was channeling Susanna Hoffs tonight; hair teased into

a voluminous half ponytail, dark, smoked out eyes and an off-the-shoulder shirt. He quickly noted the cause of the kerfuffle minutes before: a knee-length jean skirt.

“Nice skirt, Chris,” he smirked, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

“Wes said I couldn’t leave the house with the one I was wearing,” she explained, rolling her eyes. “Something about modesty, blah, blah, blah.”

As if it were a deterrent. If anything, it’s heinousness made him want to take it off sooner. A finger went to her lips as she flashed what looked to be a patent leather skirt from her slouchy purse.

“Okay, I’m leaving, Ma!” God, the girl certainly had a set of pipes on her. He winced slightly. It certainly didn’t help that Billy was inches away from the source.

“All right!” came the equally loud answer. The volume from the DiMartino women was genetic, apparently. “Remember what we talked about with your curfew!”

Chrissy let out an exasperated groan, looking up to the ceiling to try to contain herself. She was cute when she was annoyed, he noted. At least, when it wasn’t directed at him.

“They gave you a *curfew*?” he asked, smile spreading across his face before his tongue flicked out to lick his bottom lip. “You, the chick who’s notorious for being unrestrained by parental supervision?”

“Yeah, well, Wes took one look at you and decided I need more boundaries,” she smirked, grabbing his hand to drag him out the door. “Gotta impress me by midnight, head banger.”

The Camaro had screeched off Elm Street, making its way down Cornwallis. Motley Crue warbled out of the radio, Billy’s hand thumping to the beat on the steering wheel while Chrissy’s head nodded in time. She was hunched over, digging through her purse to produce the skirt she had stowed earlier. Light from the dim street lamps reflected on the leather, bathing Chrissy in an incandescent

glow.

"Hey, pull over," she said, shifting in her seat to unbuckle her seatbelt. "I gotta change."

"Aw, but the skirt suits you, Chris," the blonde teased, pulling the car to a curb between two houses. She stuck her tongue out, reaching for the lever to move the seat back.

"I was *gonna* let you do the honors of freeing me from my denim prison, but if you like it so much..." she trailed off in a sing-song voice.

Billy cocked an eyebrow, eyes flitting from her face to the buttoned skirt. Without a second thought, he turned off the car and leaned over to kiss the mouthy brunette.

Her lips pressed hard into his, biting down on his lower lip. Manicured fingers slipped beneath the open fabric of his shirt as he worked at the first button sitting at her waist. He felt her shift her attention to his neck, soft kisses lingering for a second before trailing down to his clavicle. Her handiwork had rendered his brain useless, the deepening hickey she had now contented herself with drawing most of his attention. The universe stepped in, it seemed — the first button unclasped, the second an easier target. They all seemed to give way to his fumbling now, the last few mere clasps that ripped apart.

Hands now free from their duty, Billy cupped Chrissy's face, directing her back to his mouth. The knot that had been tying and untying in his stomach the past few weeks snapped tighter than ever before. Soft moans punctuated their frenzied exchange of kisses, the leather seats squeaking with each movement. His hands made their way to her waist, one slipping under her shirt, meandering towards her breast while the other played with the waistband of her pantyhose.

Chrissy broke away first. He knew he should have expected it, but it didn't stop him from letting out a soft, needy groan. From her face, Billy could tell she hadn't wanted to stop either. Gentle hands grasped his wrists, removing them from her curves.

"Bowling," she uttered, wrapping her leather skirt around her body in a haste. "We were going to go bowling."

He didn't *hate* it.

They had arrived just as the lanes were switched over for cosmic bowling. The disco lights and music were a little cheesy for his taste, but the general atmosphere felt way less stuffy than any other ally he had been to during the day.

Chrissy had thrown herself fully into the competition, Billy following suit in a way that surprised even himself. He hadn't lied when he said he was out of practice; he'd managed one strike the entire time by complete accident. Chrissy, however, had exceeded to almost an aggravating level besides her attempt at a trick shot her dad had taught her that ended with the ball bouncing to the next lane.

"You're kicking my ass," he remarked, dunking a few fries in the plasticky yellow cheese dip between them. Chrissy leaned in with a smile, opening her mouth expectantly. Billy just chuckled and stuffed them in her mouth.

"I mean, I told you I was gonna," she shrugged, taking a sip of her soda. "Not my fault you didn't believe me."

"Liar, I totally said you were going to win."

"Yeah, but you said it like you were gonna let me win on purpose. So I had to, like, *actually* kick your ass tonight." Chrissy stood, grabbing her ball from the retriever.

Billy watched as pins crashed against one another, the girl's face lighting up in glee. She twirled around shooting him a gloating look.

Chrissy plopped down next to him, grabbing a few more fries before leaning against him. Billy draped an arm over her shoulder, slouching back against the plastic.

"You really never went bowling back in Cali?" Chrissy asked, looking up at him.

"As a kid, yeah," he replied. "But there's a ton more to do in San Diego. We lived, like... maybe three miles from the beach, so if I wasn't downtown, I was there."

"San Diego's south of LA, right?"

"Yup."

"Huh." She stared at the neatly lined pins, playing with a stray curl of hair. "Ever see any movie stars?"

"Chrissy, I lived in a shit part of San Diego, there weren't any movie stars."

"Well, I don't know!" she laughed, leaning forward to grab her soda. "People Magazine always has the 'Stars: They're Just Like Us!' section. Maybe they put on disguises and walk among the wastoids, stealing your personalities for their upcoming roles. You could've met Rob Lowe and never even known it!"

That was enough to make Billy burst out laughing. His body slumped forward, face covered by his hands as he shook with laughter. Such an innocuous comment, but, god, the combination of her straight face and commitment to the absurdity killed him. She reminded him of a friend back in California; so fucking *weird* and funny without trying.

"You're a dumbass," Billy finally managed to choke out, shaking his head.

"I may be a dumbass but at least I'm winning!" she called out, standing up. "I'm going to the bathroom. Be back, ya loser."

He stood up to bowl his last frame, picking up the ball and inspecting it. The hope was he'd at least break 80 as a score; Chrissy had passed that at least 3 frames ago.

CRASH!

He knew he had lost the moment they had stepped in the building.

CRASH!

He hadn't laughed as hard as he had tonight since the move.

CRASH!

She was supposed to be nothing but a last hurrah to punctuate the end of high school, and yet... he was seriously considering the thought of keeping her around longer than originally anticipated.

Billy stared at the small screen reading out his final score, awaiting Chrissy's last frames. He sighed, running a hand through his mess of curls before plopping down on the seating.

It was no contest; she had won.

The car hummed as the heat kicked in, idling in the parking lot of Striker's Bowling. Smoke wisped out of the cracked windows in lazy tendrils. Chrissy had bowled a solid 180, gloating as Billy finished off their fries before swearing up and down she wouldn't tell anyone she had beaten him so badly. They now sat back, a half smoked cigarette in each of their hands.

"You really miss it, don't you."

Billy glanced at the brunette before staring straight ahead again. She had the look on her face again like she was trying to solve him, trying to work out all the ins and outs of how he worked for her own undisclosed reasons. *A puzzle*, he thought. *That's what we are to one another*.

"Yeah." It was a terrible clench in his chest every time he allowed himself to sit and think about home. "Have you ever even been out of Indiana?"

"Yeah, of course. My dad and his wife moved to Tallahassee two years ago so I visit when I can." She flicked the butt out the window.

"I should take you to Cali. You'd lose your mind at how different it is, man."

"You should do it."

Billy paused. "What?"

Chrissy was staring straight at him, her face soft but serious. "Take me California. We can save up and go at the end of summer for a week or something."

A grin spread across his face, tongue catching between his teeth. His hand cupped her chin, pulling her into his smile. Chrissy's lips met against his, parted enough to let him deepen their kiss. His tongue explored the inside of her mouth, her own sneaking into his as her hands gripped his curls. The brunette pulled away slightly, hot puff of breath filling the space between their mouths.

"What was that for?" she whispered, smiling pressing against his lips.

"Just thought you might want that prize of yours I promised," he murmured, letting his hand slide under her skirt. Chrissy's breath hitched as his fingers grazed the nylon clinging to her upper thigh.

She shifted a bit, pressing her back into the leather. Her eyes darted to meet his blue ones that had been trained on her face since he first touched her. Watching her composure slip; waiting for her to beg, moan, *anything*. Billy had been drowning in Chrissy's sex appeal for too long, and it was finally time to break the surface and take a deep breath.

Thighs pressed onto his hand as he let his fingers gently rub against the seam of her hose, knees touching together as she stifled a whimper. Billy put the car in drive, his own breath quickening as one hand maneuvered the steering wheel, the other's fingers swirling around her clothed mound.

It didn't take long to find a secluded spot in this part of town. That was the one thing he could always be thankful for here, the abundance of spots for nights like these, unbothered by the general public. Chrissy, while he parked, had shimmied her pantyhose off,

stuffing them in her purse. As soon as the Camaro had shifted to park, her form had disappeared to the back seat. Her deft hands rolled the cotton of her underwear past her ankles and fall where they may.

Her enthusiasm made him giddy. No sooner had he slipped to the back, Chrissy had grabbed a fistful of his shirt, pulling him into her embrace.

"Here I thought you were gonna let me do the honors," he smirked, pecking her on the lips as he let his hand settle on her lower stomach. The other slipped under her shirt.

"Maybe some other time," she said, eyes locked onto his. Hands slid up his chest, gripping his shoulders as she pressed her chest to his. "Right now, all I need is your fingers."

He felt himself twitch inside the confines of his jeans. The other girls he had flings with since arriving didn't have an ounce of the command Chrissy carried herself with. No fight, just shrinking violets that handed their mouths and holes to him as one would tribute to a god.

His hand slipped further down from its resting place on her stomach beyond the bunched fabric of her skirt. He meandered through her manicured bush to finally find the slickness of her folds. His thumb circled her clit, gently pressing every so often to the sound of her whimpering.

Billy smiled into her neck, kissing the naked skin gently. "You've really wanted me, huh?"

She moaned softly, pushing his hand further down, begging him to enter her. Two fingers happily obliged, and he felt himself harden. The pulsating clenches around his soaked fingers were a reminder: *This could be you. This heaven could be yours*. He angled in farther, building speed as she grabbed his wrist and bucked against it. Another soft moan escaped her before she kissed him again, tugging gently on his lower lip.

"You know what I want?" he rasped, pulling away enough to get a

good look at her face. Chrissy was far away and painfully present all at once, riding his fingers with a glassy look in her eyes.

"What?" she whispered. Fingers traced the outline of his cock, teasing their way around to give just a few waves of pleasure before moving on. *Always fucking teasing him.*

"I want to be inside you."

He felt her hands undo the buckle of his well-loved belt, working at the button of his jeans. A smirk settled on his face, letting his fingers sink in and out of her faster. Chrissy slumped back, hands releasing his pants as the beginnings of an orgasm washed over her. His fingers slipped out, teasing her entrance with as light a touch as he could muster.

"Billy—" she whined, hand gripping his wrist again.

"What?" he cooed, face softening into a sympathetic smile. "You weren't done?"

"Please..." The pleading had become almost inaudible, a loop of one word leaving her parted lips.

"Finish what you started," he coaxed, moving her hands back to the button of his jeans, letting his thumb brush against her engorged clit a few times. Her squirming under his touch was enough to make him want to rip his jeans off, to feel what he had been wanting for weeks wrapped around his cock. She *earned* this teasing though, from the hell she gave him for so long. The shudders she had let him listen to over the phone, every preview of the sounds he could pry from her.

Chrissy's fingers completed their arduous task, freeing him from the confines of the denim. Her reward was his fingers slipping back inside her, knocking the breath out of her in surprise. He watched as her chest rose and fell in time with the tempestuous speed of his craft. Her hips rocked into his hand, stiffening as her orgasm washed over her, her voice paralyzed by climax except a shuddering sigh.

If there was a medal for fastest time opening a condom in Hawkins, he would've won by a long shot. Her lips met his, desperate for the

next part of their dance. He lifted her lower half to meet his erection, feeling the slickness that had coated his fingers against his package. Pulling her close, he slipped into her, letting out a gasp of relief. Steadied against the rear dash, he thrust into her, hips rolling into her thighs eliciting a moan. If the brunette was listening closely, she would've heard a barely audible groan from him. He wanted nothing more than to drink her up slowly, drown in her.

“*Fuck* , you’re hot.”

Chrissy couldn’t look away, it seemed. Her eyes were locked on his, closing only when he hit a sweet spot. She was drinking him up too, intent on committing this to memory. Gasps made their way out of her mouth, halting but in time with the bouncing of her tits. He didn’t last long — *why would he after all these weeks of teasing?* — but he gave a few hard and deep strokes inside before letting her body fall to the seat again. Billy felt his own body buckle, leaning back into the leather bench seat as he tried to catch his breath.

The two of them sat apart for a handful of seconds, Billy eyeing up Chrissy’s still-bare lower half. Maybe he could coax another round out of her. There was at least a few more condoms in the glove compartment, and they certainly had enough time—

“Shit,” he hissed, looking down at his watch.

“What?” came the lackadaisical response, Chrissy reaching over to the floor to try to find her underwear.

“It’s past midnight.”

She froze, whipping her head to look at him. “You’re fucking with me.”

Chrissy scrambled over to him, grabbing his wrist to read the time for herself. Billy couldn’t exactly read the look on her face, but he had felt the same thing more than once when he had been late. She pushed his arm away, grabbing her bag from the front as she swore under her breath. The jean skirt made its final appearance of the night, quickly replacing the leather number he had quickly decided was one of his favorites she had worn. Billy busied himself with

cleaning himself up, watching as she climbed to the front again.

“Hey, what about your underwear?” he reminded, looking around quickly for the black pair that had disappeared into the darkness of the car.

“Just give them to me on Monday,” she dismissed, voice muffled by her hands now covering her face. “I just gotta get home.”

Billy obliged, letting the car rev before taking off down the street.

“Wes is going to murder me.” A frustrated groan rattled in her throat. “I’m gonna be so grounded.”

The roar of the Camaro filled the quiet streets of Hawkins, a beacon of his presence that lurked in the night more often than not. He wondered how often Chrissy had heard the car roar past her street to and from another girl’s house, if she had always been patiently waiting for a night like this to finally come. A pang of... something, guilt maybe, hit his chest as he remembered her admission of being *less than*, being picked last.

He was going to try his hardest to make sure she would never feel like she came last while he was around.

Tires screeched to a halt in front of the split level on Elm, Chrissy hurrying to gather herself as the door flew open. He was surprised by the quick peck on his lips as she slipped out of the car, passion heating in his core again.

“Hey Chris?” he said, leaning forward. She paused, door in her hand. “I had fun.”

Chrissy’s face beamed, slamming the door before she ran up the steps.

7. bracing for impact

Chrissy DiMartino was grounded.

Not just the routine punishment, either. Her mother had noticed the lack of pantyhose on her legs, prompting another sideline discussion with Wes. No phone for a week became no phone and no leaving the house for *two weeks*, barring a genuine apology and no attitude the first week. She knew the attitude thing would get her. So two weeks without the outside world it was.

"All I'm saying is, I hope his dick was worth losing out on Olivia's party this weekend," Annette said, blowing smoke out of her nostrils.

Chrissy shrugged, huddling closer to her blonde friend. It was way too cold to be skipping class and sitting on the steps behind the gym to smoke, but if she was denied a social life outside of school... By god, she was going to make room *during*.

"I'll live," she said. "Besides, I thought Olivia's was gonna be your big move on Jeremy. You don't need me to be there."

Annette let out a whine, head leaning on Chrissy's shoulder. "But you're supposed to be my moral support!"

"Yeah, how's Annette supposed to bag a point guard without the DiMartino magic touch?"

Chrissy's head whipped to see the source of the snarky comment. Her eyes widened, a grin spreading across her freckled face. The former king himself, Steve Harrington, was making his way towards them, his breath forming white clouds in the cold of the air.

"Stevie !" she squealed, standing up to run to him.

"Chris, you said you'd stop calling me th—"

She mashed her body against his in a hug, feeling an arm pat her back through her coat. "Oh my god, it's been for *ever* since you came out back to hang with us. I feel like I never see you anymore!"

"Yeah, it's a bummer we only have Spanish this year," Steve answered, pulling away from Chrissy's embrace. "Hard to have a conversation when Señora Russell only allows *español* in her classroom."

"That's true," she agreed, taking a drag of her cigarette. She offered it to Steve, who shook his head and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "It's been forever since we really talked. Like, I think last time it was right after the whole Nancy-Jonathan thing. Which is still a total bummer."

"You can do better than her, Steve," Annette piped up from the steps.

"You totally can," Chrissy agreed, drawing a lazy circle in the grey snow with her boot.

"Thanks for the confidence," Steve grinned. "It's freezing, what the hell are you two doing back here?"

"Could ask you the same question," she said, returning to her spot on the stoop.

"Well, it's fourth period, and you skipped Spanish so..." he trailed off, shrugging. "Figured you'd be back here but not sure why."

"She got grounded because she wanted a ride on the Billy Express," Annette announced. Chrissy smacked her arm, eliciting a fit of giggles from the blonde girl. "What? It's true, plus it's not like Steve's *not* gonna hear about it."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, seriously," Chrissy admitted, rolling her eyes. "I didn't get home in time for curfew—"

"*Curfew*? When did Patty and Wes give you a curfew?"

"—and I may have come home not wearing exactly what I left with."

Steve was silent for a second, lips parted in disbelief. A laugh erupted out of him, his hands landing on his thighs as he doubled over. Annette joined in, gaining another smack from Chrissy before her

face rested in her hand. *So much for having a little empathy.*

“You’re getting sloppy, Chris,” he finally managed to gasp out between laughs. His hand brushed a few stray hairs from his face, letting him regain composure. “Oh my god, that’s legit the funniest thing I’ve heard all day. Chrissy DiMartino’s lost her edge because of some tight jeans and an earring.”

“I did not!” she shot back, face now flushing deeper than the original rosiness the cold had given her. “Wes has been on my case all week anyway. He was just waiting for a reason to throw down the hammer.”

Steve threw up his hands in concession, a cheeky smile still on his face. She scooped up a bit of snow, chucking it at the other teenager. Annette’s laughter, interspersed with snorts, rang out behind her.

“Where is Billy, anyway?” Annette asked after she had calmed down. “He didn’t come find you this morning before school.”

“Carol said he got in late.” Chrissy took another drag of her cigarette, flicking the ash off the end. “She had a dentist appointment today and saw his car pull up when she was getting into school.”

“Weird. He’s, like, never late.”

Chrissy shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll see him at lunch anyway.”

“Him and Tommy H. were talking about leaving campus and eating,” Steve chimed in, leaning his shoulder against the wall. “Heard them talking before I bounced from study hall.”

“Yeah? He say anything else?”

The hesitation from Steve let a pit form in Chrissy’s stomach. She absentmindedly flicked the butt of her cigarette into the snow, shifting to look at the other brunette full on.

“I mean, that’s another reason I came out here. Billy was, uh, telling Tommy about your... date.”

Chrissy’s lips puckered, her tongue tracing her teeth before letting

out a short sigh. "What did you hear?"

"More than I wanted to. Pretty sure everyone around us heard too." Steve's eyes shifted down, trying to avoid her eyes, which were trying to bore a hole in his head to learn just *exactly* what was said. "If it's any consolation, he had nothing but glowing reviews about you."

"Asshole," she muttered under her breath. A hand swept through her fluffy tresses. Her mind was working through this new information at a mile a minute, concocting whatever she could to spin their night together in her favor. God, she hoped it wouldn't come to that. Billy could be a douchebag, but she *liked* him and the desire to destroy any last sexual prospects in Hawkins for him was nonexistent.

No, more than likely she'd just have to own this one. Hopefully, he would too, proudly displaying her to their peers.

"*Shit*, it's cold," she sighed, standing up. Annette quickly followed suit, flicking the butt into the snow. As she passed Steve, her hand patted him on the shoulder. "Hey, once my two weeks are up, you wanna hang out? I'll give you money so we can get some stuff from Mark and chill at the quarry."

"Why do I have to buy?" he asked, turning to follow the two girls. "Is Mark not selling to you anymore?"

"It's a whole thing, I'll tell you later. Let's motor, I'm freezing."

The echo of the last bell had trailed off, the halls littered with the freed student body. Chrissy had spent the rest of the day glommed on to Annette whenever possible. She'd seen Billy in passing a few times, neither of them having the time to give more than a nod in each other's direction. She shuffled textbooks into her locker, slipping on her jacket while staring hard at particularly nothing. The clang of a body against the metal next to her gave her a startle, bag dropping to the ground.

"Jeez, someone's jumpy today," Billy smiled. He looked her over in that devil-may-care way he always did, eyelashes lacing and unlacing as he blinked. It was criminal how beautiful his eyes were. He bent down, grabbing her bag and handing it to her. "Miss me?"

"Not particularly," came her indifferent tone. She knew her face was betraying her coolness, her lips a thin line. "Where were you this morning?"

"Better question: where have *you* been?" he answered, eyebrows creasing together. "Your phone's been disconnected all weekend."

"Grounded. Parentals took my phone *and* I'm on house arrest for two weeks." She studied his face, noting a butterfly closure on his eyebrow. "How'd that happen?"

"Got into it with my dad. Guess Wes called yesterday to talk to me but got my dad instead." The look on her face must've been horrified enough to warrant his most soothing tones and a sweet smile. "Hey, it's nothing. I'm just glad you weren't ignorin' me or something all weekend."

A deep sigh filtered through her nose, eyebrows crumpling together. Wes may have been a hardass at times, but he'd never even consider raising a hand against her. Not everyone was as lucky, she supposed. Chrissy prayed this was a one-time thing.

"Why'd you tell everyone what we did Friday?" she asked quietly, the click of the locker filling the small beat of silence. "That was private."

"You're telling me you didn't spill to Annette the moment you saw her? I talked to Tommy and that was it."

"And Tommy told Carol, so everyone else got the story pretty quick." Hazel eyes flitted down to the floor, staring at her own boots. "Plus, Steve said you guys weren't exactly quiet about it in study hall."

"Harrington came tattling to you?" Billy asked, unamused. A darkness seemed to flicker in his eyes, unnerving Chrissy. "What, he's your eyes and ears when you can't be around?"

"It's not like that," Chrissy shot back. "We're friends, he was just

looking out for me. Which is more than I can say about you. You know how fast things get twisted here."

"I wasn't thinking. Promise I won't talk so out in the open about this stuff again, just... keep Harrington out of our business."

Chrissy felt the questions bubble in her throat, why he and Steve had such an intense dislike for each other, why Steve needed to be placated when it came to her relationship with Billy. She knew asking would just lead to another argument, and she was tired enough as it was from her day-long defense. "Fine."

A calloused hand palmed the back of her head, sinking into the plushness of her hair. Billy bent forward, planting a kiss on her forehead before pulling her into a quick hug.

"You know," he murmured, his mouth creasing into a smile, "I couldn't stop thinking about you this weekend."

He wouldn't have believed her if she told him how often she had replayed their passion in the backseat of his car in her mind. How ever-present the ache for him had become, clouding her thoughts. "Me either."

"Your parents are still gonna let me drive you home, right?"

Chrissy nodded. She had bargained for at least that much during her two-week sentence, knowing Max was a good enough excuse if she wasn't home exactly on time. The redhead was gone more often now that her little boyfriend's parents took her back home by dinner. Chrissy knew she had a tight lip on the comings and goings between her stepbrother and the girls he saw. She could trust Max to be her alibi if need be.

"Well then." He licked his lips, teeth peeking out from between his small smile. "Guess we just have to take the long way home."

8. winded

The juxtaposition of Mike Wheeler's house and her own always threw Max for a loop. There, it was filled with rambunctious energy, four pubescent boys constantly squabbling while she and El exchanged looks. Everything felt bright and shiny in that basement, far off from whatever was going on in the world. The events of November didn't seem to even exist anymore in their little bubble, pushed aside by budding romances and ridiculous fart jokes.

El didn't talk much to the redhead still, which Max didn't mind much. She knew she had trouble with finding words, so Max mostly did the talking. It was nice to have a girl she could call a friend.

She always hated going home after their gatherings. Billy's car would come roaring up the driveway, filling all of them with dread. That really hadn't changed; no matter how much different he was towards her now, there was always going to be a twinge of fear when the party was together. A few times, she had gone upstairs to find him talking to Mrs. Wheeler, leaning close and laughing like he did with Chrissy. Max never said anything. Saying something meant a fight, and things were too calm between her and Billy to interrupt that.

This Sunday had been no different. The joy slowly slipped as they pulled up to their house Old Cherry. The moment they had gotten in the door, Neil was in Billy's face, her stepbrother confused as to what he had done this time. They exchanged a glance, and Max hurried into her room, face crumpling as tears stung at her eyes.

She hated crying. No matter if it was alone or in front of someone, it felt like a weakness. Everyone outside her family was so prone to tears, even the adults. They allowed their feelings to manifest however they saw fit. She was almost jealous.

Whatever was happening outside her door had been building for quite a while. Little silent fights, doors slammed too loud, all of it coming to a head with whatever wrong Neil had decided Billy had done. Muffled insults filtered through her door, Billy's voice cracking as he tried to keep composure. Max grabbed her Walkman, hastily settling the headphones over her ears before clicking play. It drowned

out most of the noise, but the thud and breaking of glass managed to slip through.

It wasn't like she hadn't tried to help Billy before. There had been a few times when things got especially bad back in California and she had spoken up, pleading with Neil to stop, but it only served to anger both her stepfather and brother. The more she had interfered, the more likely it was that Billy would push back at her at a later time. Her mom had learned her place sooner than Max. The explanation her mother had given her as to why she rarely interjected herself in their blow ups still gave Max chills.

"The more we try, the worse it's going to be for him."

Max was relieved of the memory by the slamming of the door next to her room. She removed her headphones tentatively, leaving the safety of her bedroom to peek out the door. Neil had left, probably to his workshop in the basement, and her mother was busy picking up the pieces of a vase near the doorway. Max's breath hitched, noting Billy's doorknob was tinged red.

She leaned an ear against his door. Shuffling came from within, the drone of heavy metal mixing with low-toned swears. The flick of a lighter and the squeak of his bed came not long after, followed by the slam of his phone on the holder.

"Son of a BITCH! " she heard him yell, followed by the sound of something thudding against his wall.

Max looked over at her mother, who was now looking between Billy's door and her daughter. She made her way over to her shaken mother, who had swept the last bits of porcelain into a small trash bag.

"What happened?" she asked in a low voice, taking the bag from her mother.

"That girl he's been seeing —"

"Chrissy."

"Yes, Chrissy. Apparently Billy upset her father by not getting her home on time. He wanted to talk to him, but he was out picking you

up,” her mother said quietly, standing up. “Neil talked to him instead.”

“He went after him because Chrissy’s dad said she didn’t get home on time?” Max said incredulously. “Mom, he can’t just *do* that.”

“Max, things are different when you’re seeing someone as a young adult,” she explained delicately. “Chrissy made a deal with her parents to be home on time so she wouldn’t get up to trouble, and she didn’t honor that. Neither did your brother.”

He’s not my brother. The words bit at her tongue, quickly swallowed as she realized how untrue it rang nowadays. “It doesn’t make it okay.”

“I know, honey.”

Billy emerged from his room, holding a bloody shirt to his forehead. The look he shot at Max made her feel small, swallowed up by the fierce ocean of his eyes. He huffed, walking towards the bathroom. The door didn’t slam this time, just creaked close.

She knew what a bad idea it was to approach him after Neil laid into him. The song and dance of nights like these went just about the same every time; Max went to her room, Billy to his until he felt he could face the communal spaces of their house to clean himself up. *It’s sick*, Max thought, heart in her chest. *It’s sick that we’re all alone in this house together.*

Barefoot feet padded towards the bathroom against better judgement. It was still slightly open, just enough to see Billy pull his hair back in a small ponytail as blood dripped off his face. She took the plunge, pushing the door open slowly.

Billy made no effort to acknowledge her presence, instead starting his ritual of wetting a washcloth and dabbing it again the cut. Max made her way in, sitting on the edge of the bathtub in silence, watching his stony reflection in the mirror.

“Grab the butterfly closures for me, will you?” Billy’s eyes were now looking at her through their reflected faces. He looked tired more

than anything. Max nodded, scooting around him to the cabinet where all their supplies were.

She peeled off the waxy backing of the closure, walking closer to the blonde. He reached out a hand, shaking to blow his cover.

“Do you want me to put it on?” she asked, watching him. She tried to harden her expression as well, hoping she wouldn’t have that pitying look he hated so goddamn much, the look he pushed away every time he saw it. *Please, please let me be here this time.*

There was a pause. “Sure.”

His body collapsed onto the closed toilet, head leaning forward for Max’s ease.

“That’s a lot of blood for such a small cut.”

He cracked a small smile. “You remember when we used to watch wrestling and Ric Flair would just be *drenched* in blood?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. It was one of their only shared interests when he was younger. “I thought Harley Race was gonna kill him at Starrcade.”

“Same here. But, right here,” he pointed to the gash on his eyebrow, “is where they hit to make each other bleed. Heals pretty fast and looks gnarly as hell.”

“That’s kind of cool,” Max answered, the words feeling dry in her mouth. She knew he was only telling her this to quell any concern for him. Billy fought like it was the only way he could breathe, but these were not fights. This was one-sided. She put the plaster over his eyebrow, watching him wince as her fingers made contact.

“If Chrissy asks, just say you don’t know what happened. Okay?”

She stood to wash the smeared blood off her hands. “Okay.”

Hiding, she thought. That’s what they’ve been doing all this time. And now, Chrissy was just another person to hide things from. Just another person who wanted to peek behind the curtain but wouldn’t

be able to handle it all if they knew.

She kept her word. Monday night, Billy and Chrissy were leaned against the Camaro just like usual. They talked the whole way home, laughing at each other's stupid jokes. She even joined in a few times. It all was perfectly normal, right up until Chrissy let Max out of the back, shooting her a sad look before saying goodbye for the day.

It knocked the wind out of her.

Max ran into the house, slamming her bedroom door behind her as she slid down beside her bed, still bundled up in her coat.

She finally understood the anger that welled up in Billy when she gave him that exact same look.

9. four days

Four more days. That's all she had left to power through. Then she could go back to her own life, not the forced family time her parents had enacted to stop her from blasting the same Lita Ford and Ratt cassettes on repeat until her sister went to bed.

It wasn't necessarily bad. Caitlin, her eight-year-old sister, was eager to play dress up with Chrissy's less risque clothes and even sat still long enough for a few makeovers. The gap between them felt so wide age-wise that it kind of made her miss Max a bit. You could only play Go Fish and Garbage so many times.

Chrissy had camped herself in the living room this particular evening, curled up under a throw blanket with the ugliest pattern she had seen in her life. Caitlin was spread out on the floor, flipping through a Sears catalogue during commercials. Wes had been successfully run out of the room by the obnoxiousness of MTV, while her mother listened to a call-in radio show in the kitchen.

The phone rang out shrilly. Chrissy's eyes flitted briefly to the direction where her mother had picked up. Probably was one of her sisters. She paid it no mind, turning her attention back to the TV set.

"Christina! Annette's on the phone asking about school," her mother called out, cupping the microphone of the phone.

With a groan, Chrissy lifted herself from the couch. Annette had a penchant for calling when she was in the middle of something. This time, it was the new David Lee Roth video she had been waiting days to see since it dropped. She met her mother in the kitchen, reaching out her hand for the phone.

"Remember, only school work talk. You're still grounded," she reminded. Chrissy rolled her eyes and nodded, a hand on her hip while the other waited expectantly for the phone. Her mother handed it off, walking away grumbling about spoiled children and lack of respect.

"Hey."

"Okay, listen, first: I *do* actually need the assignment for US History because I forgot to write down the reading for tomorrow and Mr. Westerback already hates me."

"Yeah, I figured." Chrissy looked at her nails, noting a chip in her polish. She'd have to fix that tonight.

"Second, you owe me BIG time for what I'm about to do because I'm really sticking my neck out here."

"Oh my god , Annette, just tell me what you want to tell me."

"After you give me the assignment, take your stuff to the basement, say you're gonna study down there." There was a pause, Annette drawing a dramatic breath in before continuing. "You've got a surprise waiting at the back door."

" Uh ... okay." Chrissy stuck the receiver in the crook of her neck, digging through her backpack to pull out a notebook. "Reading tonight is page 145 to 165."

"You're a lifesaver!" her friend exclaimed, rustling of a book picked up by the phone. "Okay, I'm gonna let you enjoy your surprise. Kisses."

Chrissy didn't have the time to reply or ask further questions before the line went dead. She stared at the smooth plastic of the phone, more annoyed than she had initially been. No matter how dramatic Chrissy was, Annette managed to surpass her in all aspects. Whatever surprise awaited her, it was probably less interesting than the video she had torn herself away from.

But, she did what she had been instructed, gathering her schoolwork and shuffled to the basement. Her mother, who was busy putting together a puzzle, caught a glimpse of her elder daughter and cleared her throat.

"Honey, where are you going?"

"Basement. Gonna work on homework." Chrissy blew a strand of chestnut hair from her face. "I need some new scenery."

"All right. Dinner should be ready in a half hour."

"Okay," she called behind her, thundering down the steps.

The DiMartino's basement was not an extraordinary one. Her parents had put some money into renovating it, refinishing the paneling on the walls and putting in beige carpeting. The furniture was all the stuff from their previous apartment in Hawkins, before Chrissy's mom and Wes finally tied the knot and bought their much roomier house. Avocado green couches were arranged lazily between the rattan side tables gifted by her weird hippie aunt. Wes' next project was to create a game area. Something about family time and utilizing the space for parties. Chrissy liked the grungy atmosphere as it was; any time more than a few friends were over, they could retreat here, away from prying eyes.

She shuffled her way to the basement door, unlocking it quietly. It *had* to be something stupid. Annette usually tried to pull off grand best-friend-forever gestures when Chrissy had gotten herself in deep shit, but she never quite got it right. Last time it had been a few Hershey bars and an issue of Seventeen still in the shopping bag. With the receipt. She cracked the door open a bit.

Hazel eyes widened in shock, her lips parting as words tried to filter through her short-circuiting brain.

"Hey," Billy greeted, flashing a shit-eating grin.

"What are you *doing* here?!" she whispered harshly, fingers gripped the wood of the basement door harder.

"What does it look like?" His hand covered hers, pushing the door open a little further. "Making sure you don't off yourself out of boredom."

"If my parents see you, we're both dead—"

Her chastising was cut off by Billy's lips pressing hard into hers, calloused fingers tracing the side of her face. God, how unfair it was to be able to melt someone with your touch. Despite her brain pleading with her to close the door on him — *you're almost home free*,

only four more days— her id won out over her ego and superego. With a frustrated sigh, she widened the door, stepping aside to make room for him to pass. Billy's smile widened again, slipping off his outerwear as he strode into the rec room.

"You have a half hour." Chrissy sunk cross-legged into the lumpy cushions, wrapping a throw blanket around her shoulders. "Did Annette put you up to this? Because if she did, I'm gonna murder her."

"Nah, we were talking about how bummed you've been and she wanted to do something nice. She thought she'd get in trouble with your parents, but I bribed her into helping by telling her I'd talk her up to Jeremy at practice."

Stick your neck out for me, my ass, Annette . It was unusually sweet though, Billy going through the extra effort to see her. Perhaps her bad mood today at school had been something he wanted to remedy. Or, he was just sick of hanging out with Tommy H. and Carol alone.

She was suddenly hyper-aware of his gaze, soaking her up in her current state. Chrissy had taken to her post-breakup routine during her two week imprisonment. As soon as she was through the door, makeup was wiped off, school clothes exchanged for the comfiest, baggiest pajamas possible to go braless in, and hair thrown up into a haphazard bun. There was no one to impress here, no need to be the exaggerated version of herself.

"You look different without makeup," Billy finally said. "Younger."

Chrissy buried her face in her blanket. "I look like a total kid without it."

The couch squeaked as he shifted closer. "I didn't say it was *bad* . You kind of remind me of... shit, what's her name, Jodie Foster? You've got the same freckles. It's cute."

Slowly, Chrissy peeked out of the patterned blanket, eyes doubtful. Reassurance came in the form of a forehead kiss. It was softness she had expected, almost *demanded* , of any of her previous boyfriends, but not from Billy Hargrove. Billy was not her boyfriend. He was a

friend, a confidante, a really, *really* good lay, but not her boyfriend. Whatever this visit was made it that much harder to not want him to be.

Instead, Chrissy pulled him gently towards her, taking his hands in her own to slide them under her shirt. This was their comfort zone, and she'd be glad to stay there as long as he would let her. *Four more days*, she thought, heat rising in her core as he shifted her legs to straddle him.

"Do I have the same tits as Jodie Foster, too?" she whispered, giving a smile that never quite reached her eyes.

"Way better." Billy bit his lower lip, grinning as his index finger rolled against her nipple. Chrissy cupped his chin, teasing her lips against his until all she could taste were Reds on his tongue.

"Hey," Chrissy murmured, breaking away from his lips. "What do you want to do for your birthday?"

The last two weeks had mashed themselves together in a blur, but she swore it was the 11th. It'd crossed her mind that spending Valentine's day was off the table, whether they had wanted to do something or not. Billy's birthday was barely a week after she regained her freedom.

"Hmm. You, mostly," came the raspy voice buzzing against her neck. Chrissy rolled her eyes. *One track mind*.

"I'm being serious."

"So am I. Party's gonna happen this weekend, so don't sweat it. Focus on the *now*, Chris."

She was just about to object when one of his hands slid under the elastic of her pajama pants, stopping only once his fingers grazed her underwear. A whimper took the place of words, her face digging into Billy's shoulder to muffle anything else he might attempt to get out of her.

"What's wrong, pretty girl?" he cooed, feigned concern coating every syllable. "Don't you want me to thank you for last Thursday?"

With no night to cover them and time constraints abound, Billy and Chrissy had taken to a trade off of fingers and mouths. Attention casually given back and forth like lunch bought between two friends.

Thursday she had given him a blowjob. The absolute delight in his eyes, every moan and curse under his breath... It washed over her; allowed back some of the power she had held so strongly when all this began. Before Billy had figured out how to drown her in his intensity. He'd called her pretty that afternoon, tried out the syllables of her full name in his mouth.

Christina.

“Billy—”

You have no clue how pretty you look right now.

The sound of her younger sister's voice calling her up for dinner broke through her thoughts. Her eyes latched on to hopeful blue ones, gripping his wrist gently and depriving herself of his touch. The normal mouthy goodbyes, promises of imagining him at night, lost themselves in her lungs. In the vulnerable headspace Chrissy found herself in, they felt too shallow.

Four more days.

“—you have to leave.”

10. happy barfday

There was a certain anxiety that came with turning 18. Sure, being able to call yourself an adult was kind of cool, but there really wasn't anything Billy looked forward to besides that. The drinking age had been raised to 21 last year, to everyone's dismay. He also wasn't sure how long he'd have his father's roof over his head once the big one-eight hit. At least there were minimal expectations of his life outside of high school. 18 and beyond would come with few disappointed faces in what he would become in life.

Friday was his last day being 17. It hung over him the entire drive to school. Max kept stealing glances at him during their drive, trying to figure out what was under that blank stare. He'd dropped her off, smoked one last cigarette beside his car, and sauntered into the school.

"Hey, Hargrove, I think someone vandalized your locker," a smarmy voice came from the side of the hall. He gave the other teen a questioning look before quickening his pace. That would be the last thing he needed today, a dipshit trying to lay claim to his spot at the top by destroying his property. As he rounded the corner, Billy's eyes widened, eyebrows creasing in confusion. What he saw wasn't vandalism, but *decoration*.

Streamers twisted and draped across the grey metal of his locker, small balloons taped in between the gaps. It was... adorable. Something he definitely wasn't used to, especially when it concerned anything to do with him or his birthday. A small smile cracked on his face.

"Happy Birthday!" Chrissy's voice guided his eyes to her incoming hug, her curves sinking against his body. "You're surprised, right? Even if you aren't, you better lie and say you are because it took me and Annette, like, an hour to buy everything and put it up last night."

"I'm surprised, all right," he grinned. "You do this for everyone, or am I just that special?"

"You're one of a select few." She puckered her lips, standing on her

tiptoes for a kiss. He obliged. “Patty said everything’s good for the party tomorrow. Everyone’s chipping in for a keg and her older brother said he’d buy some booze.”

“Your parents aren’t gonna freak if I pick you up early, right?”

“Nah, I told them we’re grabbing a few more people on the way there.”

“Good,” he nodded. “Because we’re gonna need some time alone so you can give me my present.”

Patty Laufell had volunteered her house for the site of what was to be one of the biggest parties of the class of '85. She was either out for the glory of a tale that could be retold in bars for years or she was just naive as to what the night held. Billy wasn't sure which.

Either way, there was at least 80% of the graduating class present and several groups of underclassmen who either had been invited or snuck in filling the house and the closed in back porch.

The first few hours of the night had drifted past, raucous music blaring and birthday shots done. Chrissy had kept up with him, which had been an impressive feat until she wandered off with one of her friends. He was two more beers and a few hits of a spliff in before he saw her make her way back to the kitchen, now missing her sweater she had wrapped around her waist. It was nice, knowing he could go about his own business at a party without her glommed on the entire time. He lit a cigarette, taking a deep drag.

A partygoer swooped by, handing him another cup of whatever was in the punch bowl (Patty called it a secret recipe) before chatting him up. Basketball, how drunk Chrissy looked, the game of beer pong happening on the back porch. As he felt himself loosening into the conversation, the weight of another human crashed into his shoulder, throwing him off balance.

“Shit,” he uttered as some of his drink splashed out of the cup.
“Watch it, man.”

“ You watch it, Hargrove.”

Billy glanced up, cigarette dangling from his mouth. It took a second to recognize the bleach blonde asshole smirking in front of him. Travis Williams, linebacker for their school’s average-at-best football team. Always had an attitude, especially after Billy had supposedly stolen a girl from under him months ago.

“Y’know, if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to get on my bad side tonight, Williams.” He took another drag, sizing the jock up and down. “Which would be a shame. But maybe I’m giving you too much credit. You don’t strike me as a guy who’s got the brains or the balls to mess with me on purpose.”

“I think that’s where you get me wrong, Hargrove,” Travis said. Billy snorted, returning the cigarette to his lips before shifting to walk towards the kitchen.

Travis snagged the cigarette out of Billy’s mouth, taking a puff before dropping the still-lit cigarette in his cup. Billy looked down, tongue licking his lower lip as a smile that never quite reached his eyes spread.

“Your funeral.”

He lunged at Travis, feeling the football player grapple him with ease. If only he wasn’t so fucking *drunk*, he’d have the advantage. Billy threw a punch at the jock’s head, feeling the searing pain from bone colliding with bone.

The linebacker went down with a heavy thud. A chorus of “*Ohhh!*” surrounded them, bodies shifting backwards to watch the escalating scuffle. His boot stomped into Travis’ ribs, a yelp coming from the other boy. Dropping to the knees, Billy delivered another blow to his head. Fingers attempted to grip his arms, jolting back with another strike to the face.

He heard an unfamiliar girl’s voice behind him, screaming to stop.

Begging him to get off Travis. The sound of skin hitting skin of his knuckles slamming into the other boy's jaw, began to drown her out. Travis pushed him off, landing a solid blow on his brow. Billy felt the still-healing skin split open again, gushing blood down his face.

He wobbled to his feet, cackling. His hand swiped at his eye, trying to relieve the sting from crimson dripping into his eye. Gasps came from all around him. *Gotta be the most lively birthday party they've been to*, he thought as his face split into a wild grin.

"You're a fucking psycho, Hargrove!" Travis yelled, grabbing him by the hem of his open shirt. Billy felt his back slam into the wall, sending a shock up his spine.

"Really? *I'm* the psycho?" he jeered, tongue licking the blood off his upper lip. "I'm just tryin' to enjoy my party, man. You're the one who went postal over *jack-all*."

Before Travis had the chance to respond, Billy headbutted him, eliciting another round of cheers from their audience. Finally free of his grip, he swung hard.

Chrissy had been grabbing another cup of whatever gasoline-adjacent concoction Patty had come up with. Her intention hadn't been to be on the cusp of blackout drunk, but with her newly regained freedom she'd decided to say *screw it* and lose herself in the debauchery of tonight.

She stumbled away from the kitchen island, colliding with another guest. The pink liquid slopped out of her Solo cup onto the floor. She stared at it for a second, blowing hair out of her face. A towel. She needed a towel.

As soon as she had laid a baby blue tea towel over the mess, she realized the room had emptied of all the other partygoers. Setting the cup down on the table, she made her way to the door frame, trying to peek over the crowd that had formed in the living room.

"Get off of him!"

A skinny black-haired girl —Jenna? Jackie? Jenny? Chrissy couldn't

remember for the *life* of her— was shrieking at the top of her lungs, only a few feet away from the fringe of the crowd. Chrissy made her way through the throng of people, only to catch a glimpse of Billy kicking a slightly larger boy in the side.

“Oh, *shit*,” she breathed, eyes widening. Pushing through the rest of the drunken high schoolers, she froze as Billy’s brow split in a sickening half-crimson mask.

She’d never seen him fight before. Sure, she’d heard stories of throw downs with other classmates or the occasional community college asshole trying to act tough. She’d seen the aftermath of his altercation with Steve, which had seemingly been bubbling between them since Billy had first laid eyes on him. She’d heard it all, but she’d never seen it firsthand.

The energy coming off him was manic, too damn happy to be comfortable. Whoever this Billy was, it wasn’t any facet of him she could recognize. It *unnerved* her.

Finally shaking free of the initial shock, Chrissy shuffled forward. “Billy—”

“Tell him to get off Travis!” Jenna/Jackie/whoever had interrupted, high pitched words slurring. “Tell that white trash to off my boyfriend!”

“White trash?” Chrissy repeated slowly, eyes squinting as she began to seethe. “Who the hell do you think you are?!”

The other girl was now dangerous close to Chrissy, diverting a section of the crowd away from the continued onslaught between Billy and Travis. “Not some *slut* who can’t control her man, that’s for sure.”

Another round of *ohhhs* rang out as Chrissy shoved the black-haired girl back. “Say that again. I fucking *dare* you.”

The other girl’s mouth dropped open, only for her face to set hard as she pushed back. “You heard me.”

Travis fell back against the rear of the couch, the scuff of furniture

legs interspersed with the two girls hurling insults and blame at each other. No one seemed to know where to look, nor how to break up the two separate fights that now occurred.

The clap of a hand against her skin sent Chrissy reeling. The alcohol had knocked all sense out of the other girl, replacing it with misplaced confidence. The brunette paused for a second before lunging forward, grabbing a handful of black hair.

That seemed to kick the crowd into action. She felt arms wrap around her waist and hands trying to pry her newfound enemy's hair from her hand. Annette, coaxing her to let go of *Jana*'s hair. Carol's slurred voice echoing Annette's request. With one last yank and a satisfying screech from *Jana*, she let go, careening sideways into Annette.

Chrissy glanced over to see a similar scene between Billy and Travis, Tommy holding Billy back the best he could as a few other neutral parties pulled Travis away. The linebacker shot her a glare as he took *Jana*'s hand, pulling the blubbering girl away. Scattered whooping came from around the room.

"That's right, run, you pussy!" Billy taunted as he stumbled back into Tommy's body. His blonde curls had become tinged a sickly pink, stuck to the right side of his face. "I see you again, I'll kick your teeth down your throat!"

With how drunk everyone was at this point, it was like the blind leading the blind. Tommy was attempting to drag a half-conscious Billy to a bathroom, presumably to clean him up. Annette had sat Chrissy on an armchair, Carol running into the kitchen to bag up some ice for her face. The party seemed to slowly resume around them, excited chattering weaving in and out of Chrissy's earshot.

"Stupid bitch," she slurred, holding her face in her hand. "Christ, that hurt."

"I know, hon," Annette said, trying to brush her friend's mussed hair into a more manageable ponytail. "You almost scalped her. That's gonna hurt way more in the morning than your face."

"Didn't know you were that vicious, Chris," Carol grinned, lazily

handing her a bag of frozen peas.

“Me either.” Chrissy winced as she placed the plastic against her skin.
“Did you see where Billy went?”

“Uh, Tommy was taking him somewhere. Probably the bathroom.”

Chrissy remained seated for a few seconds before heaving herself up, staggering as she gained her footing in her drunken state. “I’ll be back.”

Wobbling her way to the bathroom, she abandoned her low heels to the hardwood floor. A broken ankle after all this wasn’t worth it. Her hand rapped on the door.

“Tommy? You guys in there?”

“Yeah, hold on.”

The door clicked open, Tommy sighing through his nose as he nodded her inside. Billy was seated on the hexagon tile, a fluffy white hand towel bunched against his forehead. He didn’t seem fully aware of Chrissy’s presence at first, eyeing her up before long lashes weaved themselves shut.

“Jesus,” Chrissy breathed.

“Yeah.” Tommy cleared his throat. “It look like it split way worse than before. I think he needs stitches.”

“Crap,” she uttered under her breath. She slid next to the blonde the floor, taking his free hand. “Billy? We’re gonna take you to the ER, okay?”

No answer. His breathing was smooth and deliberate, like he was trying his best to keep it all together. Chrissy felt his hand squeeze hers softly, an eye cracking open to look at her. He blinked, looking forward again.

“Keys are in my jacket pocket,” he finally said, wincing as he shifted to stand up.

"I can't drive. I can barely see straight right now." She shot a hopeful look at Tommy.

"Hey, don't look at me. I'm not getting my ass kicked if the Camaro gets messed up," he said, throwing Billy's free arm over his shoulder.

"Shit," she said. If that was any indication, anyone here with a car was probably going to be plastered. "Shit. Okay. Give me a minute, meet me out front."

A rousing cheer rang through the living space as Billy finally emerged. He seemed to enjoy it, waving his free hand as Tommy helped him out the door. Chrissy snaked her way to the scene of the fight, where Patty, Annette and a few others were trying to clean up the blood left behind.

"Hey, Patty, can I use your phone real quick?"

"Why?" Her voice was frayed with annoyance. Chrissy noted she'd have to find a way to really make it up to Patty for everything.

"I gotta call someone to take Billy to the ER," she said meekly, picking up a wad of napkins.

"It's in the kitchen."

Chrissy meandered her way back to the kitchen, tossing the napkins in the overflowing garbage before grabbing the receiver of the phone. Fingers quickly pressed in a number, the line ringing in her ear. She wasn't sure yet if this was a good idea or not, but he was one of her only shots to get out of here safely.

"Hello?" came the groggy voice over the phone.

"Steve?"

"Chrissy, it's... two in the morning. You're lucky my parents are gone right now."

"I need you to come over to Patty's house on Hemley." There was no answer. "It's urgent."

“Like how urgent?” he said flatly.

“Like, ‘I need a ride to the hospital’ type of urgent.”

She heard him shift around, the cord slipping against itself as he sat up. “You’re hurt? What happened?”

“Not me,” she said, closing her eyes in a silent prayer. “I mean, I did get hit, but I’m fine. It’s Billy that needs to get stitches and stuff.”

There was a silence, long and uncomfortable. She could’ve sworn he set down the phone or hung up on her if she didn’t know any better. “Steve?”

“Yeah, I heard you.”

“You know I wouldn’t ask you unless I absolutely needed your help. Everyone’s drunk and you’re the only person right now I can trust.”

A frustrated groan came from the other end of the phone, Steve shifting around again. “*Fine*. But only because I don’t wanna be responsible for one of you driving drunk to a hospital and dying on the way there. You owe me. *Billy* owes me.”

Chrissy breathed a sigh of relief, winding the cord around her finger. “Thank you, Steve, seriously.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

11. in the waiting room

Doesn't she know what she's asking of him?

Steve realized there's no way she does. Not in a million years could Chrissy fathom how little he wanted to be around Billy at this very moment. It'd been on the tip of his tongue every conversation. *You know he gave me a concussion. You know he broke my nose and fractured my eye socket. You know he almost beat the shit out of a middle schooler.*

And yet, he hadn't mustered up the courage to say any of it. Steve had just hoped Chrissy would grow bored of him like she had with all the other schmucks that had crossed her path. Billy Hargrove was nothing but a novelty, and yet he had managed to hold on to her attention.

Maybe, Steve thought, he wouldn't hate this outcome as much if Billy was any sort of consistent. One day he was joking and including Steve in conversations, letting him take jabs at Tommy under a watchful eye. The next he had the same look on his face from that night before he had slammed through him to the Byer's door. *Daring* Steve to push his luck again.

"Dammit," Steve muttered to himself, finally shifting the BMW into gear. He'd have to see which Billy he'd get tonight.

As he pulled up to the Laufell house, his stomach did a flip. Chrissy and Billy were on the front steps, as he expected, but so was Tommy. He took a deep breath, grey snow crunching beneath his shoes.

Chrissy shot off the steps to meet him on the shoveled path, enveloping him in a full body hug. Steve gave her a small pat on the back with the limited arm movement he had, noting the smell of alcohol permeating the air.

“Am I glad to see you,” she breathed, letting go.

“Yeah,” Steve said slowly. “So, what happened, exactly?”

“It was a whole thing. I’ll tell you in the car.”

Tommy shuffled past with a bloody Hargrove, barely giving Steve notice. He didn’t know what was worse, the jabs Tommy would take during practice or the stony silent treatment when no one was around. He didn’t miss the prick at all, but there was a certain emptiness where Tommy’s companionship had been.

Steve flitted past them, opening the back door to lay out a discarded jacket. Hopefully it’d save the leather from any blood. He’d finally gotten a good look at the California transplant. Steve couldn’t lie, seeing the other boy in such a state gave him the tiniest bit of satisfaction.

“No way,” came Billy’s drunken voice. “I’m not getting in there. You never said it was going to be *Harrington*, Chris.”

“Billy, you really aren’t in a place to be picky right now—” Chrissy tried to reason.

“*No.*” Even drunk and presumably light headed from blood loss, the blonde was putting up a pretty good fight against his caretakers.

“Dude, just get in the car,” Tommy sighed, pushing him down on the seat. Billy groaned as he his back hit the backrest. Steve watched, unimpressed, as Tommy kicked Billy in the shins a few times before Hargrove lifted his feet into the car.

If he was going to be like this the whole way there, Chrissy *really* owed him a big favor.

Prince played softly over the car radio, filling the quiet of the witching hour. Thankfully, the ride wasn’t a long one from Patty’s

house, only about five minutes in the dead of night. The less time he had to spend in a compact space with Hargrove, the better for all of them.

He couldn't help but want to put a bandaid over all this, to pretend like Chrissy was enough to mend the still festering wound between him and Hargrove. It was a specialty of his; pretend at the dinner table that his parents don't hate each others' guts, pretend he could heal the hole in Nancy's heart where Barb resided with only love and some meaningless teenage fun—

Whoa. He took a sharp breath in. *Let's not go there.*

Steve glanced at Chrissy before looking back at the near pitch-black road. "So, are you gonna tell me what happened or do I have to guess?"

"Well," she sighed, "from what I saw, Billy and someone from the football team got into it and he got punched in the face where he got cut open a few weeks ago. And then, he headbutts the other guy, which was not his *smartest* moment, and that's... all I remember. Football's girlfriend slapped me and I kinda stopped paying attention after that."

Steve gripped the steering wheel harder. "Wha—"

What is wrong with everyone in this town?!

"Hey, at least I won that one," Billy piped up from the back.

"You guys got pulled apart. I don't think anyone won," Chrissy reminded him, her tone bored.

"I'm *definitely* sure I kicked his ass."

An exasperated sigh came from next to Steve. "Sure Billy, you won, and that's why *you're* getting stitches and he's not."

Billy chortled in the back seat, only to stop suddenly. "Oh no."

His eyes flicked to the mirror, trying to see Billy's face in the darkness. "What?"

“Stop the car.”

“What? Why?”

“Just stop the damn car, I’m gonna barf.”

“Oh *no-no-no-no-no!*!” Steve hollered, shooting a panicked look at Chrissy and then Billy through the rearview mirror. The BMW came to a screeching halt, and within a moment, Billy had booked it out the door onto the side of the road. Steve and Chrissy exchanged a disgusted, almost pained look. He looked upwards at the car ceiling, to the other side of the road, *anywhere* to avoid accidentally seeing Billy emptying the contents of his stomach.

“Aren’t you gonna... I dunno, aren’t you gonna help him?” he finally spoke up. Billy’s heaving continued, far too close to his car for comfort.

Chrissy let out a halted laugh. “And risk getting puked on? I’ll get out when he’s done, man.”

“Some girlfriend you are,” he grinned. “If that were you, you’d be pissed he wasn’t out there babying you.”

“Shut up.” She playfully pushed at his shoulder. “And I’m not—we’re not... like *together* together, Stevie.”

Steve squinted, mouth agape as he tried to find words. Not his girlfriend? As far as he knew, they’d been almost inseparable for the past month. “O-Okay. I mean, that’s not bad, as long as you’re okay with it.”

“It’s whatever. We have fun, that’s all that matters,” she shrugged with a half smile, leaning towards the window to check on Billy. “Probably for the best considering my track record, eh?”

He let out a quiet snort.

The almost incoherent yelling of the still-bleeding birthday boy outside caught both their attention. Steve let out a halted laugh as Billy stumbled a bit back up the slope of the road side.

"Looks like you're up," he grinned at Chrissy. She rolled her eyes and slammed the door closed.

As Billy slumped back into the BMW, Steve snuck a look over his shoulder at him. The blonde was reclined, eyes scrunched closed. He looked... vulnerable. Beneath all the bravado, there was something resembling a normal human.

How many people have seen this version of you, Hargrove? he wondered, turning back to face the front. The probability that he was now one of few shook him a little. The click of the passenger side seatbelt brought him back from his thoughts. With a small sigh, he started the engine again.

The last time Steve Harrington had been to Hawkins General Hospital had been after the tunnels. He'd braved through everything on pure adrenaline, setting fire to writhing vines and held his breath as a hoard of Demodogs rush past him and Dustin. Adrenaline wore off though, and his broken face and concussion had to be dealt with.

He had refused to name who'd done it, even at his parents' constant pushing. Doing so would mean he'd have to figure out a practical story that could cover why he had been at the Byers, why he'd been in Hargrove's stolen car, and why he reeked of gasoline. Steve knew he wouldn't be able to keep it all straight at some point. It was better to just let it go.

Here was where he ended up, at an eerily similar time when the only ones waiting were a few people with a severe case of the flu or a broken limb. It was freaky. *Deja vu*.

Chrissy was seated next to him. She'd been given an ice pack for her cheek, which now sat limply on the side table with the spread of outdated magazines. He rarely had seen her so quiet. The last time in memory was their sophomore year, when her dad had moved to Florida. She had been absent for a few days; her return was as if a

wraith had taken her place at Hawkins High instead.

"You okay?" Steve asked softly.

"Yes," she answered, after a few seconds. "No. I don't know."

"You... wanna talk about it?" he tried, shifting in his seat. "We're gonna be here a while, and I'm all ears if it keeps us awake."

"I've never seen him fight before," Chrissy mumbled. Hair slipped from her ponytail, settling on her shoulder. "Like, it's not like I *didn't* know he got into fights. And everyone saw how banged up you were. I just... I guess I didn't think about that part of him very much."

"Does it scare you?"

"I guess. I'm scared for him, but I'm scared for the other person, too." She blinked, looking around the waiting room before settling on his face. "I still don't know why you guys got in a fight."

There was an uncomfortable pause that threatened to wrap itself around Steve, throttling him to death like the black vines in the tunnels. His brain screamed to let it all out, to tell Chrissy the kind of person she had decided to be a girlfriend-but-not-girlfriend to.

He beat the shit out of me because I dared to protect some kids.

"Steve?"

He nearly killed me because I had the gall to tell him what to do.

"It's not important," he shrugged, running a hand through his voluminous locks as a heavy pang hit his chest. Chrissy gave him a doubtful look, but seemed to be unwilling to press further. Tonight had mostly likely been enough of a shock; holding onto whatever image she had created of Billy in her head would be hard if he said anything. The waves of her hair fell against his shoulder, little waterfalls of chocolate slipping against his teal shirt as her weight leaned against him.

Coward.

A pit formed in his stomach. If he was a coward, so was Billy Hargrove. The bastard hadn't even *tried* to broach the topic with Chrissy. At least Steve had been building up his nerve, even if it had left him up to this point.

The low drone of a contemporary electric piano piece playing over the speakers filled the silence, only punctuated by the chipping of nail against nail polish as Chrissy fussed over her hands. Neither of them shifted, the comfort of each other's presence too delicate to disturb at the moment.

Five minutes passed, then another five.

Steve exhaled, blowing a strand of hair from his face. He couldn't take it. Chrissy was one of the few people who hadn't treated him differently after his fall from the top of the social hierarchy. An actual friend, someone he had opened up to after Nancy and Jonathan, albeit in a smoke-filled haze at the quarry. He would be damned if he would hide anything from a person who was nearly incapable of hiding anything from others.

"Chrissy?"

"Mm?" Her voice was faint, a barely audible hum in her throat.

"Billy's bad news."

Silence.

"I know I said it wasn't important, but you don't know how bad my fight with him was." Steve swallowed hard, looking at the flecked linoleum. "He threatened Max's friend. Slammed the poor kid against the wall, and I *swear*, if I hadn't gotten in sooner, he would've started beating the shit out of Lucas. He was unhinged, Chris. He fractured part of my face and my nose and gave me a goddamn concussion. Max stopped him, I don't remember how. But I feel like... if she hadn't, I'd be in a coma."

There was no answer. Steve took a shaky breath.

"I just don't want you to be in the dark with what he can be like," he finished, looking down at her.

“Chrissy?”

Her hands hung listlessly in her lap, soft measured breaths hitting his clothed arm. Steve’s eyebrows furrowed, a small sigh escaping his frown. She’d fallen asleep at some point, who knows if she had even heard a fraction of what he had said. He couldn’t blame her; the alcohol and ruckus of tonight would tire any normal person out.

Before he was left to stew in his thoughts again, the thud of heavy boots against the hospital floor came around the wall. Billy looked more coherent than when he had arrived, his eyes trained on the scene in front of him. His hair was still slightly pink in the front, but the blood had been washed from his face. A delicate lacing of suture on his forehead boded a new scar, his eye starting to puff in a nasty purple bruise.

As he made his way closer, Steve diverted his eyes from Billy’s face, instead looking at Chrissy’s unbothered expression. The blonde stopped in front of them, bending down to examine the sleeping Chrissy.

“Looks like she didn’t get hit that hard,” he finally spoke up. The medical staff must’ve done their best in the back to sober him up, as his words no longer slurred. “That’s good. She’d freak if it was worse. So would her parents.”

“Wes would probably send her off to Catholic school if he knew what a hellion she really is,” Steve added, shifting slightly as he tried to pry himself from under Chrissy’s dead weight.

Billy met his eyes, mouth creasing in a gentler version of his usual smug smile. “Probably. She’s something, that’s for sure.”

Steve shook the girl gently. “Chrissy? It’s time to go.”

She stirred a bit, letting out a muffled whine as she covered her face with her hands. Billy let out a quiet chuckle, taking a seat next to her. Steve felt her body shift away, Billy slowly moving her towards him. The brunette curled into him, like the negative space in his arms was made for her.

“Christina,” Billy whispered, brushing a few strands of hair out of her face. “We gotta head out, chica. Steve’s gotta take us back to Patty’s. Annette said she’d wait for you, yeah?”

He couldn’t recall the last time Billy had called him by his first name. It felt different, a bit weird, but not *bad*. Chrissy started to open her eyes, a haze of sleep still cast over them.

“Can’t I just stay by you?” she finally asked, rubbing her eye carefully to avoid smearing her mascara further. “Annette’s family is *loud* and I’m pretty sure I already have the start of a hangover.”

“Trust me when I say my house is *not* going to be any quieter,” Billy smirked, looking her up and down. “You told your parents you’d be by Annette’s.”

“Fine,” she conceded, slowly sitting upright.

Steve stood up, fiddling with the smooth metal of the keys in his jacket pocket. “You want help?”

“Nah,” Billy said, getting to his feet. He pulled her lazily up by her hands into a hug. “I got it. Go ahead and get the car.”

No sooner had Steve pulled up to the entrance, Billy had helped Chrissy into the front seat with thankfully less effort and resistance than he had been loaded into the BMW. The drive was another silent one, Chrissy drifting back asleep and Billy staring blankly out the windshield, unlit cigarette dangling between the broken skin of his lips. The energy was different, more controlled and calm rather than the jagged glass Billy’s ego became, threatening to cut anyone who dared to move within it.

The car slid into the open spot in the Laufell’s driveway, idling for a few seconds before Steve turned off the engine. It only took a few shakes to realize Chrissy was finally passed out, the alcohol finally taking its toll on her body. She’d fought valiantly against it, Steve mused as he opened the passenger door, helping the blonde maneuver the lolling body of his friend. Billy hefted her onto his back with practiced hands, wincing as she pressed into his back. He slipped ahead of the other boy, opening the door to Patty’s now-

destroyed living room in anticipation.

“Thanks, man.” The words didn’t seem right coming out of his mouth. Billy seemed to notice it as well, trying to avoid looking him in the eyes as he walked past.

“Yeah,” Steve answered, gripping the door knob. The hatchet hadn’t been buried quite yet, but the earth seemed to have finally broken ground. “No problem.”

12. bella donna

March had drifted in and out, taking with it the bitter cold and snow and leaving April a gift of rich greens and rain. Billy hadn't realized how much he actually missed living foliage until the first time he had seen the shrubs in front of the house bloom again.

With the arrival of spring came a busier season for the Hargroves, who had all become a bit restless in the sleepy town of Hawkins. Susan had been offered a higher position at the bank, and with it came a training event over the weekend in Fort Wayne. Neil had tagged along, talking the whole week about using it as an excuse to 'reconnect' and celebrate her promotion. Billy and Max didn't mind. They'd said goodbye to their parents Friday night, Susan leaving instructions for how to reach them and a few twenty dollar bills in their care for pizza and emergencies.

Max had bounced almost immediately, deciding to go and have an extended stay at some friend's house. He'd never bothered to remember the kids he'd seen hanging around his stepsister. It was probably the girl with the mousy brown hair who was way quieter than the rest of the nerds she surrounded herself with. It was no skin off his back. If anything, it meant he had an entirely empty house for two days, where he could do whatever he wanted.

Which meant he promptly had called Chrissy.

Annette had covered for them, picking Chrissy up from her house and dropping her off with her overnight bag. Billy was starting to like the blonde more and more with how often (and willingly) she would help Chrissy lie to her folks about her whereabouts. He had let her stay a bit, smoking her out on the front porch as a thank you as the sun disappeared into the horizon.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Annette had winked, giving Chrissy a hug. She'd moved in for a hug from Billy, which in his soaring high, he had allowed.

He came to the realization Chrissy had never seen the inside of his house before. For good reason, though; he'd been trying to avoid her

crossing paths with Neil as long as possible. Putting a face to the DiMartino girl whose innocence he had *apparently* wrecked would just be more ammunition Neil didn't need. It was all terribly mundane, showing her the basics; where the bathroom was, the kitchen, Max's room (on her request), and finally, his room.

"You live like this?" Chrissy grimaced, looking at the chaos of his room.

"It's usually worse," he offered. He'd tried cleaning up, discarding the empty cans and full ashtrays, but with his limited time between Max leaving and Chrissy's arrival, there wasn't much he could do.

"That's not very reassuring." Chrissy dropped her bag next to the worn down sofa. "Man, and I thought *my* room was bad."

"I've never seen your room, but I'm positive it's just as bad. Besides," he added, gesturing to the rest of the room, "this is an organized mess."

"Organized mess, yeah, sure," she laughed, breezing past him to check out his cassette collection. "Stevie Nicks? Really?"

"Yeah. My mom's really into Fleetwood Mac." The words felt funny in his mouth, a memory he wasn't quite sure he had been willing to share. "Stevie's got a good voice."

"She does," Chrissy agreed, pulling out the case. She finagled with the stereo, fast forwarding the tape before letting the first notes of Edge of Seventeen blast over the speakers. Billy plopped himself down on the couch, watching her bounce in time with the music.

She hopped to her feet, mouthing the words as she danced around his room. No, it seemed more like she *floated*, loosely padding across the hardwood in time with the beat as her arms moved fluidly in the space around her head. A smile played on his lips as she started to sing along, finally overtaken by the music. Her voice was rough, untrained, but in key and just as passionate as Nicks herself. She turned to him, dancing closer, eyes glittering as she belted out along.

But the moment

That I first laid

Eyes on him

All alone on the edge of seventeen

Chrissy grabbed a cigarette from his nightstand, lighting it before resuming her groove. She grinned, making her way over to Billy. Smooth hands grasped at his wrists, an attempt to pull him up.

“No,” he laughed, keeping his hands firmly in his lap.

“C’mon,” she coaxed, handing him the cigarette. He took a drag, giving her a doubtful look. “No one’s here to see you’re not being a tough guy.”

He let out a stubborn groan, letting her pull him up against her, swaying with her . Maybe it was the weed melting his caution away, but as the chorus came on, he felt himself let loose, singing along off key with the tape and Chrissy. She let out a laugh, head pressing against his chest.

“You can’t sing at *all*,” she giggled, lip caught between her teeth.

“Yeah, thanks,” he answered sarcastically, taking another drag of the cigarette before handing it off to her. His curls bobbed as he exhaled, nodding his head to the music before leaning in to kiss her jaw. Billy felt her seize at his touch before relaxing into him. He peppered her neck with kisses as they swayed, before putting his mouth to her ear.

“*Well I hear you*,” he sang, unnecessarily loud and more off-key, “*In the morning! And I hear you! In the nightfall!*”

Chrissy shrieked in surprise, pushing him away as he burst out laughing, lifting his arms to avoid her half-assed swats at him. Her face hardened into an annoyed pout, taking one last drag off their shared cigarette before putting it out in one of his many ashtrays.

“You’re a jerk,” she said, brushing chestnut waves from her face before flopping onto his unmade bed. Billy rolled his eyes, a smirk

playing on his lips. He tossed himself on the bed next to her, the shock of his body hitting the bed bouncing her up in the air a bit.

“I thought it sounded pretty good,” he said innocently, blue eyes taking in her face. She tried to hide a smile, glancing at the corner of his room to avoid his gaze. “Wait till you hear my Don Henley impression.”

“Don’t you dare ruin that song for me.” Chrissy attempted to sound stern, but the laugh breaking her voice betrayed her. He bit his bottom lip as a smile spread across his face, leaning his head into his calloused hand.

“So you’d rather I sing Stevie’s parts?”

“I’d rather you not sing it at all,” she said matter-of-factly.

“*You in the m—*” he started to croon, only to have a hand cover his mouth. He let out a snort, letting his head fall into the crook of his arm.

“Idiot,” she mumbled under her breath.

“Spazz,” Billy shot back, sitting up with a stretch. “I’m gonna order a pizza. You can either keep pouting here or go find something on TV.”

Chrissy remained on his bed as he stood, wandering away to the kitchen to rummage through the few takeout menus available in Hawkins. She took a deep breath in, waiting a bit before sitting up.

When he called earlier that afternoon, she hadn’t expected him to want her to stay the night. Hell, she was surprised he even wanted her in his house. He had been in her home a few times, mostly to be polite and appease her parents after their first date screw up, but he’d never ventured past the living room. No matter how intimately they knew each other, there was always going to be questions they’d never dare to find answers to.

She stood, wandering around his room to get a closer look without his watchful eye. Candles. A few books she'd never even heard of. A pile of notes she'd snuck to him in English, folded back neatly into their little crafted shapes.

She caught her own gaze in the mirror on his makeshift vanity, padding over to look at the mess of hair products. Here she was begging her parents for a Laura Ashley vanity when he had just tossed one together without a second thought. *Innovative*, she mused, a slight grin playing at her lips. *But still disgusting.*

She crept out of his room, taking note of the furnishings his parents had chosen— very beach themed for a family that wanted to leave the coast— for the main room before settling in the floral couch. The TV clicked on, a rush of information from the local news filling her ears. She clicked through a few times, dialogue cut off moment by moment as she searched for something to watch until Dallas started. The Hargroves had cable, at least. She pressed a few buttons, letting the MTV sting drone as it transitioned into a Wham! video.

"Hey, what kind of pizza do you want?" Billy asked, leaning against the doorframe.

She shrugged, picking at her nail. "Don't care as long as there's not olives on it."

"Sausage green peppers and mushrooms good?"

"Sounds good to me." Her eyes drifted from the TV to Billy, who was now punching in the number for one of the two pizzerias in Hawkins. He looked so normal in this setting; just a kid putting in a pizza order instead of Billy Fuckin' Hargrove, human magnet for the attentions of everyone around him.

He was still a human puzzle, but every crack in the facade was another piece fit into her understanding of his intricacies. Chrissy didn't think she'd ever get bored of figuring Billy out.

Chrissy turned back to the TV, focusing on Pat Benatar as she slid into the crook of the couch. The weight of a body plunked next to her, followed by the cold smoothness of metal again the exposed

flesh of her shoulder. Billy had two beers in hand, one offered up to her. The brunette gingerly took it, the hiss of carbonation escaping the can as she pulled back the tab. Billy took a swig of his own before setting it down on the coffee table, leaning in to press soft lips against hers.

Chrissy felt her grip on the can tighten as he bit her lower lip, beckoning her to scoot closer. She set the untouched can next to Billy's, crawling on top of the blonde. He gave an appreciative murmur, heavy eyes focusing on her lips before flitting up to meet her gaze.

"Dallas is on in ten minutes," she grinned, giving him a deep kiss while her fingers played with the longer curls of his hair. "So you have ten minutes to get this out of your system before I start slapping your hands off me."

Billy's face went slack, fingers gripping into the sides of her hips hard enough to make her wince. "Why do you always do that?"

"Do what?" Chrissy blinked.

"Act like a brat," he retorted. "It's really not cute. At all."

"I'm not trying to be one," she protested, frustration bubbling up in her. "Maybe I just wanna hang out alone for *once* without you immediately getting in my pants."

"Then why'd you get on top of me?!" Billy's face screwed into a glare, the ocean of his eyes becoming a storm as he released his hands from her sides.

"I still want to make out, that's why!" Chrissy felt her own face harden, lips forming a thin line. She shifted away, reaching for her beer before plopping back onto the plush cushion in a huff. "Correction: *wanted*. You ruined the moment."

"Whatever." Billy grabbed his own beer, taking another swig as they stewed in the quiet frustration that clouded the room.

She was telling the truth. It seemed like as time went on, Billy had become less concerned with spending time with her as a friend and

more as a release. It was enough to make her want to pull away, to fall into the same pattern as her trail of exes. She'd left them out of boredom, out of disgust at their eventual treatment; Billy was different, somehow. Chrissy wasn't bored around him, in fact, she felt more attentive of the world than she had in her life. Pulling away would rob her of the small light she had finally found, the plans they had slowly let form to give meaning to the banality of Hawkins.

Billy flipped through the channels, finally settling on the end credits of The Dukes of Hazzard. A silent appeasement, letting the melodrama of Dallas fill the air as they sat side by side.

"Do you even watch Dallas?" she finally asked, cupping the beer can in both hands. Her nail traced the rim of the can,

"Not really. Susan and Max do, so I catch it sometimes when I'm bored."

The cushions shifted as he slung an arm around her shoulders with a sigh. Chrissy leaned into his body after a bit of deliberation, folding her leg under her to get more comfortable. Hazel eyes glanced upwards, noticing his stare didn't quite register the program on the TV set.

"Are you mad?"

"I think I should be asking you that," he said with a disaffected tone, almost uncomfortably calm despite his set jaw.

"I'm not," she said, blowing out a sigh through her teeth. "Just... I don't know. It'd be nice to goof around and talk more."

It was his turn to sigh, head tilting to look at the ceiling. "Okay. I can do that. What do you wanna talk about?"

"I don't know. You can tell me about California. What you wanna do when we visit. I can tell you about the time I visited my dad and almost got attacked by an alligator." She sank onto his lap, head resting on his thigh. His hand followed, settling on her waist as fingers twirled the hem of her sweatshirt.

"Right now?"

"No, not right *now* . I wanna watch Dallas."

Billy let out a muted laugh, gazing down at her with an incredulous look. His mouth broke into a small grin, lip disappearing between his teeth.

"What?" she asked, defensive.

"Nothing," he said, shrugging while trying to hold back a smirk. "Just debating if you deserve pizza even though you're *still* being a brat."

"I am not!" Chrissy insisted as she sat up, an indignant look on her features.

"Hey, I'm the one who's paying for the food," Billy teased. "I get to decide if you get any with how you've been acting."

"I'll pay you for a slice if I have to."

"Do you have money on you?"

Her lips pursed, prompting a laugh from the blonde.

"I can pay in a different way," she offered, batting her eyelashes as she grabbed his inner thigh. It only managed to prompt another fit of laughter from Billy.

"You're going to have sex with me for *pizza*?" he gasped between his cackling.

"I was gonna have sex with you anyway, dingus," she said, smacking him in the arm. A smile wrestled its way onto her face. She brought the can to her lips, trying to cloak her grin as she took a drink.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, his nose wrinkling as he smirked. "You'll get your pizza, only because I'd hate to see you start whoring yourself out for less."

"Rude."

"It's a slippery slope, kid," Billy shrugged. "First it's pizza, next I'm gonna see you hitting up Mark for a free meal at Burger King."

Chrissy bit her lip, sinking into the couch before taking another sip of beer. He unfortunately was little *too* on the nose for that remark for her comfort.

“Christina.”

“It wasn’t what you think, oh my god . I just...” She winced, feeling Billy’s judging eyes boring a hole into her head. “I *may* have slept with him a few times for free pot.”

“Is that why you make me buy from him instead of doing it yourself? You pissed off the only dude in Hawkins who deals?”

“Mark’s a scumbag, Billy. I’d rather be sober the rest of my life than talk to him ever again.”

“Jesus.” Billy sighed, realizing the gravity of the words she had spat out, even without the full context. He rested his hand against her head, kissing her on the temple. “Forget I said anything. You get free pizza and weed from me whenever you want. No strings.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking another sip. She focused her attention on Jenna Wade’s overzealous tantrum on the screen, absentmindedly grabbing Billy’s hand in her own. Their fingers laced together, his thumb running against her skin. “I’m gonna hold you to that.”

They both went quiet for a while after that. She hadn’t meant to let the dour air lift just to bring it down again. She hadn’t meant to upset him in the first place. It stung, knowing that there was some impulse in her that couldn’t help but be contrary all the damn time. Maybe if she was a little more compliant, a little less inconsistent, life wouldn’t be so hard to navigate. *You’re your father’s daughter*, her mom would always say. Stubborn, a slave to her whims, always taken by the need to be *right*.

Chrissy let out a breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding. It would be easier, she thought, if you could put your thoughts and feelings in tiny boxes and store them away for when you had time to linger on them. In this moment, she gladly buried them back down, hoping they’d never surface again.

The doorbell chimed, interrupting their half attentive watch of the melodrama unfolding on Dallas. Billy hefted himself to his feet with a grunt. Chrissy watched as he sauntered to the door, making small talk with the delivery guy. Her eyes gravitated to the curve of his bottom, watching as he moved around. *God, he had a nice ass.* That was enough to make her forget her troubles for the moment.

The door slammed shut, pizza now in his hand while the other was dropping the change from driver on a side table. Billy caught her gaze, giving a smirk as he placed the warm box on the coffee table. “You like what you see?”

“It’s okay,” she teased, digging out a piece of pizza. Gooey cheese stretched, taking some of the toppings with it.

“You want another beer?” Billy offered after downing the rest of his.

“You’re dad isn’t gonna be mad you’re drinking his stuff?”

“It’s weirdly, like, the one thing he doesn’t get upset at me about. You want one or not?”

She nodded, taking a bite. He grinned, leaning over to snag a bite of her piece, which she reluctantly let him have.

“Miami Vice is on soon. I got a drinking game we can play.” He licked his lips, standing upright again before walking back to the kitchen. “Just a warning, you should prepare yourself for a potential hangover tomorrow.”

13. overcast mornings

Billy had awoken first, greeted by the sight of a nude Chrissy curled up in his arms. After the discomfort of last night faded into an inebriated cuddle, courtesy of Miami Vice, Chrissy had dozed off. He'd carried her to bed, fully resigned to the fact that he wouldn't be getting any tonight. She'd surprised him, waking in the night to whisper how much she needed him. Crawling on top of him, riding him like the world would fall around them otherwise. *I think I love you*, rattled around in his head, unsure if the heat of the moment had conjured that thought or if it was true.

He hoped it was the former.

Fingers lazily exploring the hills and valleys of Chrissy's anatomy before she stirred into consciousness. Her chest shook out a halted breath, hands rubbing at her eyes before half-lidded eyes connecting to his gaze.

"Morning," he smiled, sandy curls falling in his face. He cupped her face gently, giving waiting lips a slow kiss.

"Morning," Chrissy answered back, voice still raspy from sleep.

He slipped his hardening cock between the smooth skin of her thighs, unexpected slickness coating him just from grazing the entrance of her slit. He let out a groan between gritted teeth, Chrissy letting out a breathy laugh at his surprise as her hand played with his hair. She took him immediately inside her after that, back pressed against his toned stomach as he rocked his hips into her.

It wasn't their usual frenzied pace; he'd decided to take his sweet time. He would make her feel *every last inch* of him inside her; crave him when he pulled out. Billy slammed into her in fast strokes before pushing far in one last time, leaving her to clench over his cock and writhe against his body.

"Billy," she whimpered, his name a plead for release.

He loved how much Chrissy *needed* him, how she relied upon him to

find her bliss. A hand meandered to her clit, finger rubbing softly against it as she continued to squirm on his cock, while the other softly stroked her hair. Another thrust, and she moaned.

"You're so mean," Chrissy whined, pulling her hips away from him. Billy's hand snapped up to the flesh of her hip, pulling her back onto him.

"Nuh-uh," he tutted, kissing the nape of her neck. "You've practically been *begging* me to take you like this. Enjoy it."

Another moan escaped her as he resumed his work, long, deep thrusts that lingered just long enough to make her writhe in anticipation of the next. He wasn't immune; it was hard to stave off his own need to finish amid all her little noises and gasps. But Chrissy DiMartino was a brat and a tease, and his chance to get back at her for the lip she gave him last night would be taken with gusto.

He flipped her over, steadyng his cock between her thighs. Teasing over her pussy lips, managing to get another round of begging before he slipped slowly in, then out. He let her stew in her lust, a whimpering mess surrounded by a halo of chestnut hair. Her hand unconsciously flew to her clit, hoping to get some relief, only to be gripped in his and pressed into the mattress.

"You poor thing," he soothed. His free hand lazily pressed against her inner thigh, thumb hovering at her clit.

"Asshole," she grumbled, gripping the pillow behind her head.

"Brat," he answered simply.

A sly smile settled on his face, fingers dragging their way down her slit as plush hips jerked against him. He played with her folds, beaming every time her hips twitched. Finally letting go of her hand, Billy leaned in to kiss her. Chrissy hesitantly met his lips, groaning into their embrace as his cock dragged along her mound. He couldn't help a breathy moan of his own; he'd been holding off as long as he could. Another kiss and he readjusted himself, the worn mattress squeaking beneath him.

Chrissy was watching him intently, rolling her hips upward as he pulled her closer. Lust filled eyes met hers and something in him snapped. His hips bucked up, shoving his cock deep inside her as svelte legs wrapped around his torso.

Lips closed over one of her nipples, sucking and teasing it mercilessly, fingers rolling and pulling on the other one. Billy thrust into her again and again, his other hand teasing against her clit as he fucked her into the bed. The sensation of his steady fingers on her clit brought about her climax, her walls clenching around him as she came. A moan tried to escape, but the pleasure had cut off her ability to use her vocal chords for that moment.

"C'mon, pretty girl," he said, hot breath hitting against her breasts. "One more, for me."

The blondes's thrusts against her built up a second climax, her hand tugging at his curls as Chrissy pulled him down for another kiss. She came, a bit softer this time, biting his lower lip as her body seized in ecstasy. A small moan came from the girl, releasing his lip before following up with a succession of passionate kisses. He groaned against her lips, his staved off climax starting to creep up on him. He left a trail of kisses down her neck, letting his head rest in the crook of her neck as his pace slowed.

"Fuck," he mumbled into her hair. "I'm gonna cum."

"Its fine," she whispered back, hands snaking up to grip his shoulders. *Thank god for birth control.*

Gritting his teeth, he bucked into her, one hand entwined in her hair while the other gripped her side hard. Chrissy stiffened again, letting out a halted cry as her final orgasm found her. That was all it took; her spasming around her and he came with a groan. His hands clenched, toes curled as pleasure ripped through him in waves, emptying into her warmth.

He panted, fully spent as sweat dripped down his muscles. Chrissy's chest rose and fell under him, her nails trailing down his back until hands fell listlessly to the bed. Slowly, he pulled out of her, watching with lidded eyes as their combined fluids dripped from her. With a

sigh, he lowered himself next to the brunette, watching as hands brushed stray waves from her face.

"C'mere," he whispered, moving to his side. Chrissy mumbled something inaudible, shifting into the curve of his body. Soft kisses were pressed to her shoulder. "You okay?"

"More than okay," came the answer, her voice laced with a rasp he didn't normally hear. "Do you have tissues? Because I'm not gonna even *attempt* to run to the bathroom like this."

Billy let out a small laugh, tracing the line of her arm. "Yeah, give me a sec."

He tore himself away from the girl, grabbing a box on top of his mantel, buried under trinkets he'd yet to find a place for. Taking a few tissues for himself, he tossed it to her before settling back into bed.

"Thanks," she murmured, cleaning herself up. "The last time I tried to make it to the bathroom from a bedroom was a disaster."

"Last time?" he asked, tossing the rumpled tissues in his wastebasket.

"Uh, yeah? This isn't the first time a guy's finished inside me."

"You're telling me you let Dan do that to you too?"

She scoffed. "Hell no, he wouldn't have been able to make it that far."

"So who...?" He sighed, burying his face in his hand. "No. Never mind. I don't wanna know."

"Well, there was Sc—"

He covered her mouth with his hand, which only made her cackle with glee. "*Jesus*, I said *no*."

Chrissy grasped his hand in hers, pulling it away from her lips as she kissed his palm. "What, are you jealous or something?"

"No," Billy retorted, eyeing her up. The glint in her eyes was

undeniable; she was loving his reaction to this revelation more than she should. "Just didn't think you were that big of a slut."

"Uh, pot, meet kettle," she shot back, a smug look on her face. "You're telling me you didn't come inside multiple other girls before me?"

"No, I have, you're just being *weird* about the whole thing."

"You're the one who's being weird about it. It's not that big of a deal." Chrissy went silent for a few moments before shifting away from him.

It was silent for a few seconds.

"So... who were the guys?" he finally asked, only to get a smack on the chest. "Hey! If you wanna be open about this stuff, fine, but you can't just clam up now that you got my attention."

Chrissy flipped back over, bed springs squeaking beneath her. "Okay, but you have to tell me yours."

"*Why?* You wouldn't know any of them."

"I might meet them while we're in California!"

"Okay, so, *hypothetically*, I'm stupid enough to point them out," Billy chuckled, "what the hell are you gonna do to them?"

"I dunno," Chrissy admitted, hazel eyes locked on to his own blue ones. "Feel superior to them because you like me the best."

"Damn right I do," he grinned, planting a kiss on her. "So: names. I need to know who's asses to kick tomorrow."

"Oh my god, Billy. You know what? I'm just gonna go shower before you try to interrogate me further."

Chrissy pried herself from his embrace, disappearing to the bathroom to shower. Billy sat up in bed before gathering his clothes off the floor and stuffing them haphazardly in his laundry basket. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, curls frizzing in odd patterns off his head and several hickeys strewn across his neck and lower

stomach. He'd seen himself like this after trysts before, but never with the absence of the tension that set in his jaw. With a deep breath, he broke his gaze in the mirror, heading to the bathroom.

The door was cracked open, wisps of steam escaping to the hall. He pushed the door open slowly, peeking in as Prince's voice rasped over the radio.

I said now, overcast days never turned me on

But something about the clouds and her mixed

She was freshly out of the shower, beads of water still slipping down her skin to the bath mat below. Chrissy barely gave him a glance, instead busying herself with drying off. Billy felt himself start to harden again, watching the brunette rub her hair dry with a towel.

Raspberry beret

The kind you find in a secondhand store

"You're a horndog," Chrissy said, the bite of her lip betraying her snark.

"Takes one to know one," he teased, pulling her close. His lips grazed her neck, fingers wandering to grip her behind.

Raspberry beret

And if it was warm, she wouldn't wear much more

"I just got out of the shower," she chastised, pushing him away gently. "You can wait."

"You can always join me."

"No thanks." The ratty towel wrapped around her, clinging as she left the bathroom. Billy blew out a sigh, stepping into the shower.

Raspberry beret

I think I love her

Hot water spilled over him, steam rising in fat tendrils. Sticking his head under the stream, he closed his eyes, wiping his bangs from his face. Opening them again, he focused on one spot in the corner of the tub that had been discolored since his father and Susan had bought the place, drifting into a sea of thought.

If, maybe, Hawkins was someplace he was meant to be, even for a while. If he would've been able to find someone like Chrissy back home. If his dad had ever felt the giddiness he felt when he saw Susan in a capacity like this; if he had felt that way about his mother. How Chrissy would look in a bikini. The silver lines on her hips. The curved scar running down the right side of her ribs that he kept forgetting to ask about. How fucking *hungry* he was right now.

He blew a sigh from his nose, turning off the water. Like most shower contemplation, it seemed to vanish as soon as the cold air hit his skin. Part of him was grateful for that.

Billy drifted back into his room, fluffing the damp mop on his head. Chrissy had stolen one of his clean tank tops from the dresser and was now busying herself in front of his makeshift vanity with makeup. A smile bloomed on his face as he licked his lips, heading to the dresser to throw some underwear on.

The blonde plopped down on his bed, stretching backwards onto the wrinkled sheets. Eyes trained themselves on Chrissy, watching as she carefully applied mascara to her already dark lashes. The concentration in her face, her mouth rounding into an oval unconsciously. His gaze lingered a little too long; she had caught him watching her.

“Quit staring, you dweeb,” she scolded, looking slightly embarrassed. A pack of matches whizzed across the room, hitting him in the arm.

“You hungry?” he asked, a grin spreading across his face.

“Dude, yes.”

Billy Hargrove was not a good cook. He wasn't necessarily a bad one either, but after years of living off TV dinners, grilled cheese and cereal while his dad had been single and then relying on Susan's mediocre cooking, he hadn't really taken the time to learn how to make much for himself.

He pursed his lips, eyeing the contents of the fridge. Eggs. He could manage that. Granted, the last time he'd made them scrambled, they'd turned out a grey, rubbery, barely edible mess. There was a chance he wouldn't fuck them up this morning, and he was willing to take it.

Chrissy finally padded into the kitchen, giving a glance to his current project before systematically opening and closing every cabinet in search of something. The clink of ceramic came beside him, then the quiet rush of the faucet. *Coffee*. Billy hadn't taken her for a coffee drinker, but then again, he didn't know much about her morning routine.

The bustle in the kitchen conjured the memory of his cousins back home playing house, cooking imaginary breakfast, setting and clearing their child-size table of plastic plates and cups in an innocent mimicry of adulthood. Little voices instructing "*You play the mommy, I'll play the daddy*," echoed in his head.

That's what this all was. Playing adults without the consequences of actual adulthood. A test run, but for what he wasn't quite certain.

He slid the finished eggs on plates, satisfied with the fact that they looked like something worthwhile to present to another human as food. Mugs clacked down on the oak table as he sat, pushing one of the plates towards the chair she had set her coffee in front of.

"Do you even like coffee?" Chrissy asked, settling into the chair across from him.

"Not really," he admitted sheepishly. "Last time I drank it was on the drive here from Cali."

"It's okay. Me either," she grinned, taking a sip. "I think I put too much in the filter, anyway."

Billy took a tentative sip of his own coffee, trying to hold back a grimace. "It's not any worse than truck stop coffee."

Chrissy gave him a cheeky grin before digging into the eggs. She gave an appreciative '*mm*' before leaning back to stretch. He watched, noting he'd have to let her take the tank she was wearing. Something about her wearing his clothes made her look that much cuter.

"It's kind of weird," he finally said, poking at his eggs as he rested his other arm on the table. "Like, you're sitting around in my shirt, eating breakfast I made."

"I dunno," she shrugged, "it's kind of nice. I wouldn't mind doing this every morning with someone."

"Yeah."

The calm was nice. So was the absence of dread, the feeling of being able to freely walk around his home. He hadn't really imagined mornings like this, someone entwined in his comings and goings. Domesticity terrified him, the reflection of what he had seen when two people lived together beating down the little desire he had to build something resembling a life with anyone. But, here he was, entertaining the idea despite his better judgement.

"I wouldn't mind it either."

14. on old cherry street

When Chrissy said she enjoyed their time alone, she had meant it with her full heart.

She didn't really mind that his room smelled kind of weird— *he'd tried to clean it more over the course of the weekend, to his credit* — or that neither of them could prepare a meal properly by themselves. The sweetness of his touch as they dozed off on the couch, his soft snoring against her shoulder as he relaxed into her; she would give anything to see those things again and again.

The rustle from his movements, half under blankets, woke her that night. All Chrissy could see was his silhouette, outlined by the glow of street lamps filtering past his makeshift curtain. In that moment, all she wanted was to reach out and know he was real. That for that time, he was hers and no one could change that fact.

Chrissy had whispered out a dangerous thing to him, in his deep slumber. She knew his unconscious mind would keep her secret, if only till she felt brave enough to speak of it again.

"I love you."

It was barely audible, a rush of breath against his chest that could easily be mistaken for a sigh, had he been awake. But the words had been brought into existence. She had announced the feelings that had been brewing, and could no longer push them down deep.

She couldn't fall asleep again after that.

Memories drifted through her thoughts, of boys who promised it all to her and left her with nothing when she proved too difficult. How her dogged pursuit of love had encompassed her until it left her hollow and jaded, now content with the amusement of high school relationships that she could break off easily without being hurt again.

She thought of Gary. The first boy she had felt swallowed whole by, a sweet junior when she was on the cusp of being a sophomore. A summer spent in his backyard adjacent to hers, the above ground

pool he threw her in to elicit a shriek. His Oldsmobile that they spent hours cruising in, her first taste of freedom as the Leaving Hawkins sign grew tiny in the rearview mirror. The cream colored quilt in his room that became the final resting place of her virginity. His family had moved to Fort Wayne, quietly snuffing out the romance they'd cultivated.

She thought of Mark, the absolute garbage heap of a human being. How fun the end of junior year was, wrapped in a near constant full body high. The hint of feelings for him, until the night he had brought over his loser friends and tried to get her to let them all have a turn with her. How she'd thrown up all night once she was back home, her mother letting her stay home the next day from whatever perceived bug she had.

She thought of Kyle. A swimmer, top of their class, a boy who was too perfect for someone as mediocre as Chrissy saw herself. If she had been smarter, she would've held on to him forever. Instead, she broke his spirit after her heart had hardened from her father's move a thousand miles away. He called it quits and she cried harder than she had all year.

She thought of Tim, who had been nice until he decided he didn't have to be anymore. He'd been the first one to call her a bitch to her face. Roy was the second to call her that. He'd punctuated their nasty breakup with a rumor she'd given him VD.

But then she thought of Billy, of the warm glow that enveloped her every time she felt his arm around her. His deep laugh and the cocky grin that would pull the corners of his lips. The shared packs of Reds, which she had grown to love just as much as his presence. Feeling his fingers run through her hair, her heart jumping when he'd allow talk of far off plans, of getting the hell out of Hawkins with her in tow. How much she wanted to ask him to stay with her forever, and for him to say yes.

A lump formed in her throat. Chrissy shifted, removing Billy's arm from around her as she crawled off his bed. She threw on her discarded nightshirt, the fabric dangling around her thighs as she tiptoed out of the room to the bathroom.

The yellow glow of the bathroom lights made her wince, eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness. She gently tried to brush the forming knots out of her hair with her fingers, staring at the heart shaped face that looked back at her. Her freckles were slowly darkening now that she'd been spending more time outside in the warmth of the spring. Billy thought they were cute, that they made her look more innocent than she was. Chrissy didn't care much to look innocent, but she had been indulging him the past few days by forgoing her slather of foundation.

With a quiet sigh, she opened the door, flicking off the switch. Returning briefly to Billy's room, she dug through the drawer she knew he kept his stash in. Hazel eyes flitted to the bed, watching him groan in his sleep, adjusting to sprawl out and take up the full bed. She wondered if that was why Billy had made her sleep against the wall; he was preventing himself from pushing her off the damn bed altogether. Chrissy gave a small smile, grabbing his things and heading to the porch.

She was two hits into a bowl she had packed, staring as the sunrise crept lazily over the horizon, painting the trees with a creeping pink and yellow gradient.

"Mind if I get a few hits before you cash the bowl again?"

Billy had opened the front door quieter than she thought possible for someone who made a ruckus everywhere he went. He stood against the frame, shirtless but wearing a pair of long pajama bottoms she hadn't seen before. A blanket from his closet was draped over his shoulder.

She held out the glass pipe and lighter to him. It was a pretty little thing, blown glass in the shape of a seashell to make it easy to hide in plain sight. They didn't have smoke shops in Indiana, so whenever Chrissy came across someone with something to smoke out of besides a makeshift bong, she had to marvel.

He took them, taking a long hit before settling on the floor beside her. "It's freezing out here, Chris. Aren't you cold?"

Chrissy shrugged, looking down at her hands as she picked at her

nail. "I didn't really notice."

With a sigh, he set his pipe and lighter down on the little side table, unfolding the white and blue striped blanket before tossing it over his shoulders. An arm laden with the woven blanket wrapped itself around her frame, pulling her close to share the warmth. Billy always seemed to be warm. No, he was like a goddamn radiator, so hot she had to push him off her during the night before she boiled over. Not that it mattered. He always snuck back against her, clinging to her like he was drowning in his bed and she was the only thing keeping him afloat.

"Better?" he whispered in her ear.

"Mhm," she murmured, resting her head on his chest.

"Why'd you get up?" he asked, fingers playing with a few strands of her hair. "I woke up to take a piss and you were gone."

"I dunno. Just felt like sitting outside by myself for a while," she answered, doe eyes glancing up at him. Billy had a funny look on his face, like he was almost hurt she had wandered off without him. "You were out cold, I didn't want to wake you."

Billy was silent for a bit, seemingly content with her answers to his badgering. He produced a cigarette from the pack he had tossed in his pocket, lighting it before handing it over to Chrissy to take a drag. She liked sharing a cigarette, even if sometimes she wondered if it was less an intimate gesture and more a cost saving option.

"You can't go disappearing in the middle of the night when we go to California," he finally said, flicking the ash into a chipped saucer on the table. "San Diego's not like this place. Someone could snatch you up and I'm not having a missing girl on my conscious."

"I'm not gonna go missing," she insisted. "Besides, San Diego can't be any worse than New York City. I can handle myself just fine."

"Okay, okay," he muttered, taking another drag before burying his face in her tousled hair.

"Billy?"

“What?”

“What’s California like?”

She watched as he took a deep breath, pursing his lips as he tried to find the words. The sea of his eyes seemed to drift off for a second, before they looked down at her expectant face.

“It’s like,” he paused, a smile forming on his face, “like a big playground. Everything’s always changing, and the beaches are unreal. And, I mean, you’re never bored. I used to go surfing whenever I could, and there’s a ton of great music clubs everywhere.”

“I’ve never been surfing,” she mused. “Could you teach me?”

“Sure. You never tried it when you visited your dad?”

“Nope.” Chrissy reached for the cigarette, taking a quick drag before handing it back. “I was too busy dying from the humidity and being shuttled around sightseeing with my dad and Lisa.”

Not that the sightseeing had been bad. Ever since her dad had moved, he’d tried his best when she visited to spend as much time as humanly possible doing things that she could take pictures of, preserving their memories together. The first visit after he had left, Chrissy had begged him to let her move in with him, to cancel her return flight so she could stay in the blissful presence of magnolia trees and the woodworking studio he’d made in the backyard for all his projects and commissions. A week hadn’t been enough to soak up his breezy self, to get enough of his attentive gaze as he listened to her talk about school and her plans for after. Her dad knew how to walk the thin line of being a good father—*as good of one from a thousand miles away*—and a co-conspirator to her teenage whims. In the end, he sent her back to Hawkins with a bear hug and a promise for their weekly call.

Chrissy realized she’d gone quiet for too long, Billy shifting in the uncomfortable silence as she had been hit with the memories she tried to keep buried.

“Maybe you can take me to Florida some time,” he offered. “Next

summer or something."

She shot a grin at him. *More plans.* "Sure. I bet your and my dad would get along pretty well."

"Yeah," he laughed softly, "that'd be one of your parents."

"My mom likes you. She'd like you more if you actually came for dinner instead of turning down her offer a million times."

Billy licked at his lips, putting out the butt of their cigarette. "I'm not good with parents."

"You're gonna have to talk with them before we go to California, you know."

"I know."

Another silence. Billy cleared his throat, pulling her to sit on top of him. It seemed to be the only way he knew how to break the awkwardness that danced around them when she brought up anything resembling a step towards a real relationship. She couldn't help but feel a pit of disappointment when it happened, but having his hands steadyng on her hips was better than *nothing*.

Chrissy leaned in, grazing his lips with her own as she let the thoughts float away, intent on savoring the moment instead. Lazy kisses gave way to more purposeful ones, his tongue exploring her mouth as fervently as the first time she'd allowed him. The fabric of his pajamas pressed into her, his cock giving a twitch as she sucked on his lower lip. The blanket was no longer needed with the heat growing between them.

He pulled away to stare at her for a few moments, soft but hesitant. "I wanna taste you."

"What?" Chrissy breathed, a confused smile on her face.

"I wanna eat you out, but you've never let me," he said, unusually soft. "And you won't tell me why."

Chrissy froze, unsure of what to say. "I just... I don't like how it feels."

"If you didn't like it, they weren't doing it right," Billy said, almost sympathetic. *Pitying* her for previously lovers that hadn't done their job the way he was overly confident in. "Let me try? If you wanna stop, just say stop and do whatever else you want, babe."

Babe. He was laying it on thick. "Your neighbors are gonna see, Billy."

He gave a cheeky grin. "There's no one awake right now besides you and me. I promise."

She hesitated for a moment, letting out a breath from her nostrils before nodding. "Okay."

Billy broke out into a toothy grin. He planted sweet kisses on her lips, soft and calculated, before making his way down her neck. Her night shirt rose over her breasts as he lay her down on the blanket, pink nipples hardening with the cool spring air. His tongue lolled around one before lips grazed over to the other, the same soft teasing making her squirm.

A low groan left her as he continued his tour down the length of her torso, stopping only when he met the obstacle of her underwear. A soft kiss pushed into the lace-appliqued cotton before his nimble fingers started to roll the undergarment off her hips and past her thighs.

"You know," he grinned, giving another kiss to her lower stomach, "these are my favorite ones you own."

"I know," Chrissy said, watching him set them to the side. *That's why I packed them.*

Nervousness rose up inside her as he situated himself between her thighs. The disaster of her last time with a man's face between her legs kept flashing in her mind, the sheer discomfort of tongue and lips that she'd fought hard to forget building a pit in her stomach.

"Hey," came his deep voice, punctuated by a kiss to her inner thigh. "Relax."

Instead of the incoming tongue she expected, he slipped a finger in her slit. A halted "oh!" escaped from her, feeling her body relax into

the familiar push of his digits inside her. As soon as the start of white hot heat bubbled in her core, he had left her. Chrissy let her gaze drift to his face, a self-congratulatory smirk on his gorgeous face as he eyed her up. She glistened off his finger in the low light, his lower lip dragging against the skin as he took a taste, never once breaking eye contact. *Obscene.*

“I know you like when I finger fuck you, babe,” he said, voice dripping with wickedness, “but I told you, I want to *taste* you.”

“Billy—”

His features dove between her legs, prompting another moan she hadn’t been expecting. Low and slow was the game, his tongue flattening against her as he licked from her entrance to clit. There was a moan from below as her hand found it’s grip in his hair, his mouth uttering something Chrissy couldn’t quite hear. She let out another gasp as he focused on her clit, swirling, sucking, letting every flick of his tongue bring her closer to the full bodied warmth of an orgasm.

His lips left her, a pitiful moan rattling in her throat as his baby blues scanned her face.

“You okay?” he asked, a sly grin playing at his lips. A look that says, *I can tease too, don’t you forget it.*

“Why’d you stop?” she managed to croak out, her fist relaxing to release a few sandy curls from her grip. The seconds pulsed by, Chrissy’s restlessness only accenting how slow time seemed to go between the meeting of their skin.

Billy bit at his lip, a chuckle emanating from him. “That’s what I like to hear.”

There were no more words from him after that, his mouth too occupied by the space between her legs. His attention had been diverted from her clit, teasing against her folds, lapping up every last bit of her that he could manage. His touch was a wildfire, threatening to consume her whole being.

She couldn't help but watch, her hand a vice grip on his curls as his lips returned to her clit, the vibration of his growl from her own roughness sending a rolling wave of bliss over her. A finger, then another, slipped into her, taking her to the next level of a pleasure she hadn't been able to fathom till this point. All at once, the wave crashed over her, hips writhing against his face as a barely stifled groan left her body. Chrissy could hear a breathy chuckle from the blonde, pleased with his handiwork.

Chrissy lay there, a barely conscious shell of herself in the afterglow. She swallowed hard, breath ragged while she berated herself for not allowing him to do this sooner. One last kiss pressed against her slick thigh before Billy leaned on top of her, letting her taste herself on his lips. She pressed against him harder, feeling his hips drag against her oversensitive mound. Another *I love you* died in her chest, knowing he'd brush it off as an incoherent post-orgasm declaration, if he acknowledged it at all.

"Get up, pretty girl," he said, voice husky. "I'm not done with you yet."

15. i could lie

Spring meant the return of the dreaded Presidential Fitness Tests. Chrissy felt like her limbs had been replaced by rubber the past week, secretly hoping that she'd have some freak accident and be excused from the mile later today. She wasn't necessarily out of shape—Jane Fonda made sure of that—but the thought of doing another pull up on the bar made her want to shrivel up and disappear.

Today was the mile for the boys. She and Annette had hunkered down on the steps behind the gym to observe, the discontented faces of their class filtering out around the track. Mr. Powell, affectionately called Peaches by the student body, had allowed them to stay as long as they promised to provide moral support.

Billy strolled out with the next wave of boys, listening as Tommy and Jeremy talked animatedly. She noticed the absence of his earring. Had she ever seen him without one in? Annette stood beside her, cupping her hands around her mouth to let out a whoop.

"Hey, hot stuff!" her friend called out, getting the attention of the three boys. "Nice shorts, baby!"

Chrissy smacked the blonde girl's leg, the two crumbling into laughter as Jeremy gave them the bird. Billy's saunter rerouted to the girls, giving the two a look up and down before shaking his head.

"What're you two doing out here?" he asked.

"Getting our kicks. Watching cute boys run for our amusement," Chrissy teased.

"Well, shit," he smirked, "that's some added pressure I didn't expect."

"You run, like, a seven minute mile. You'll be fine. Peaches told us to be your cheerleaders if you *really* need the motivation."

"Go Tigers," Annette added unenthusiastically.

A laugh rattled around in his throat, pulling a grin to Chrissy's face. He rustled in his hoodie's pocket, digging out and tossing a pack of

cigarettes her way. Hands clasped over them, looking down at the pack of Marlboro Golds. She'd been complaining lately that the Reds were tearing up her throat; apparently Billy had taken note and gone out of his way to stop her whining himself.

"Don't let her steal all of them this time," Billy grinned, pointing at Annette.

"Yes sir." Chrissy felt him press a kiss to her lips, hand messing up her hair as he ran off to join the rest of the class.

"Aww," Annette teased, "look at you, getting gifts from your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend," Chrissy said, unwrapping the pack before lighting a stick.

"Whatever, stay in denial. Jeremy doesn't buy *me* stuff unless he thinks he's in the doghouse."

"So dump him."

"That's your answer to everything," Annette sighed, taking a cigarette as Chrissy offered the pack. "Besides, if I dumped him, I'd have no one to go to prom with, and I already picked out my dress."

Chrissy snickered, pulling her braid over her shoulder. "Give yourself a little credit, Annette. You're a great catch. Guys would line up to take you to prom."

"The line would be all geeks."

"It's still a line," she shrugged, taking another drag.

"So-o-o-o-o," Annette began slyly, "are you and Billy going to prom together?"

Chrissy looked away, instead watching as the boys' gym class ran past on the track. She wasn't sure if ignoring the question or answering it would be worse.

"Oh my god. He didn't ask you yet?"

“No,” she said flatly. “He’s bad at that kind of stuff. I’ll probably just ask him myself.”

“What if he doesn’t want to go?” the blonde girl asked, concern blanketing her features. “Like, you can’t go alone. That’s tacky.”

“I’ll go with someone else, I guess. I’m not missing my senior prom.” After all, she’d mentally picked out the dress from the Macy’s catalogue weeks ago. As much as she wanted that special night to include Billy Hargrove, Chrissy had been steeling herself to experience it without him. Her own mother had told her that missing it would become a regret she’d carry forever.

“Who would you even go with?” The doubtful tone to Annette’s voice made Chrissy narrow her eyes.

“I could yell ‘hey, wanna go to prom?’ to any of those dweebs,” she gestured to the gaggle of teens running on the track, “and they would say yes. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Yeah, but Billy would flip his lid.”

Touch é. Billy had a jealous streak in him. Chrissy had seen it come out quite a few times in recent months, whenever she’d unconsciously flirt with someone at a party or a guy got too close for the blonde’s comfort. He’d never say anything, but the rough touch after, pulling her impossibly close, his general snippiness and kicked puppy look was enough to get the idea. She honestly found it kind of hot.

“Then he better go with me,” she said simply. She caught a glimpse of him jogging past, giving him a cheeky smile and a wave. Billy only shook his head, a wry smile on his face as he passed her.

Planning a roadtrip with Chrissy was far more difficult than Billy had thought.

It wasn't that she was being contrary or stubborn, but the fact that she had absolutely no head for numbers. Honestly, he was surprised she hadn't been in remedial math. At least she knew the general geography of the US.

"So, you're gonna let me drive the Camaro, right? So I can get used to it?" she asked.

"On the back roads, yeah," he said, leaning his head into his palm. "I'm not letting you drive my girl in any sort of traffic."

"I'm a safe driver," she protested. "Just because Wes won't buy me a car doesn't mean I'm not a good driver."

"I've seen you drive. It's like watching an epileptic monkey have a panic attack."

"Like you can talk."

"Yeah, but it's my car," he sighed. "Back roads and empty highways only."

"Fine." She looked back at the map on the floor, scribbled with pit stops in both their handwriting. "Are we gonna stop in Albuquerque? Because I wanna get a gift for Caitlin and she likes turquoise."

"We have to get gas before we head into the mountains, so yeah. Knock yourself out."

Chestnut hair slipped down her shoulders as she leaned forward to circle the city on the map, a pleased hum came from her throat. Billy, who had been busying him with doodling on the list he was supposed to be making, watched with a soft smile. Chrissy looked up, giving him a questioning look.

"What?"

"Nothing." He shifted back against his bed, eyes locked onto her flustered face. "You're cute when you're excited."

Chrissy bit at her lip, scooting towards him until she had crawled into his lap. "Yeah? I thought I was cute all the time."

“You are,” he agreed, grabbing her hips. “But you’re the cutest when you scream my name.”

“Max is home, I’m not doing that.”

“I’ll turn up the stereo and cover your mouth.” He stole a kiss, grinning into her lips. “She won’t hear a peep out of you.”

He’d done what he promised, but it hadn’t been enough to completely cover Chrissy’s noises or his own. Max had thrown something at his closed door, telling them to shut the hell up, that ‘other people live here, you know’. Billy didn’t necessarily care; she’d heard worse before with other girls in his past. She’d probably hear more of it before his time in the Hargrove home was done.

The two of them were basking in the waning afterglow, Billy staring at the ceiling as he played with her hair as her head rested in the crook of his arm. His mind was devoid of the usual rush of thoughts, instead focusing on the steady stream of music coming from the stereo.

“So, prom’s coming up,” Chrissy said casually.

“No.”

“Billy, come *on*, ” she whined, draping her arm over his unclothed torso. “It’ll be fun, I promise.”

“No,” he repeated a bit more forcefully. “It’s a waste of time and money. We can just go to an after party and have way more fun.”

“Fine,” she huffed, retracting her arm before rolling over. “I can always find someone else to go with if you’re so above it all. You’re not the only guy in Hawkins who wants me, you know.”

Something about how pointed her words were hit him in the chest. Billy felt his face harden in annoyance, almost *hurt*, before he reached

over to shake another cigarette from the crumpled pack of Reds.

“Fine, go with someone else,” he shrugged, the crackle of tobacco punctuating his words. “No skin off my back.”

He felt her body stiffen next to him. “Maybe I’ll go with Steve, then.”

“Well, maybe I’ll see if one of your friends is free that night. I’m sure you’ve told them in detail how good a time you have with me,” he shot back before he could think. The words were absolute poison, he knew that, but his ability to hold them back was shot the moment Harrington was even an *option* for her.

Chrissy shot up, giving him the most venomous glare he’d seen out of her.

“That’s *not* funny,” she said, voice jagged with anger.

“Neither is the obsession you have with throwing Harrington in my face,” he retorted, taking a drag of his cigarette. “You wanna fuck him so bad, go ahead. No one’s stopping you.”

“You think I want to *fuck* him?” Her voice raised with each word, watering eyes betraying the stony look on her face. “What are you, mental?”

Billy sat up, laying the half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray by his bed. A hand ran through his dirty blonde hair, giving her a disaffected look as his lips pursed.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Chrissy said, swallowing hard.

He scoffed. “Like what?”

“Like you have me all figured out.”

“Then enlighten me, Chris!” he said, his voice harsher and louder than he had intended. Another pang in his chest hit as she flinched a bit. “Because this manipulative *bitch* thing you’ve got going on seems like a cornerstone of who you are. You always have to have it your way, and damn anyone else’s feelings if you don’t have it on the spot.”

Shit. As his anger bubbled over, he'd gone too far again. Tears started spilling down her face, her face crumpling before brown hair curtained her shrinking figure.

"Chrissy," he croaked, putting a hand on her shoulder. The brunette jerked her body away, leaning against his wall. "I didn't mean to call you a bitch. I'm sorry."

"But you meant everything else," she said, still not looking at him.

"I—"

"You know how many times I've wanted to ask you to be my boyfriend?" Chrissy blurted out. "I stop myself every time because, god forbid, I'm not the cool girl who gets you off and puts up with all your insecure *bullshit* without you having to commit to mine."

Billy let a long sigh through his nose. "I thought you were fine with what we are."

"Well, I'm not!" she exploded, voice cracking. "And you don't get to be jealous of Steve—who, by the way, has *ZERO* interest in me—when you don't even want to be with me like that."

Be with her *how*? Like the night he'd snuck into her house, christening the basement in their lust for each other until they fell asleep in each other's arms? He'd awakened a few hours, only to fight the returning sleep as he marveled at how peacefully she slept. Perhaps, like the day she'd whisked him to Navy Pier after the ice had thawed? How he swallowed the inklings of an 'I love you' that was too soon to mean a thing as she showed him the expanse of Lake Michigan; the closest thing to an ocean view she could give his homesick heart.

He'd been giving everything he could muster to her. Even so, he'd managed to let down the girl who had almost no expectations of him.

If she wanted more, if he gave her what she asked of him, it would be the undoing of the careful attachment he'd allowed. He simply didn't believe it to be in his DNA, if his father was any indication of how his lineage knew how to love. Being able to openly care about Max had

only been a recent hurdle he'd managed to overcome. Whatever metamorphosis it would take to be what she wanted couldn't happen while he was still hiding in his protective shell. Not while he was in this house. Maybe not even while he was still in Hawkins.

Billy heard a breath hitch in her throat before she stirred again, leaving the safety of his bed for the mess of his room. Mussed hair fell around her shoulders as she gathered her discarded clothing.

"I'm just..." Chrissy managed to choke out, pulling on her pants and t-shirt. "I'm gonna go, I can't..."

He watched her shift away from him, her feet moving swiftly to put a physical distance between them. Despite knowing her leaving could let him return to the safety of detachment, his hand reached out, catching one of her wrists as he attempted to stop her from going. He didn't know what he was doing, he just knew he didn't want her to leave.

"Christina." Her name rattled in his throat, an incantation to keep her tethered to him. An apology; a *plea* for forgiveness.

His fingers pressed against her wrist only served to push more tears down her face. Her hand flew up to catch them from falling to the floor, a sob finally slipped from her mouth. It was a fruitless effort, as they plopped near her feet in dark circles on the hardwood. Billy gently tugged her back onto the bed, cradling her as she continued to cry.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, burying his head in her hair. "I'm so sorry."

How long had she been waiting on him to call her his girlfriend, to stop deflecting questions from others with '*we're just friends*'? How long had he been willingly ignorant of the hurt she had bottled up? It'd probably started around the same time as his panic at his own growing need to have her around, when he first started realizing he was falling hard for her.

"Chris," he said softly. "If you want to have fun, I'm your guy. You know that. But I don't know how to do the relationship thing. If that's

what you want, you can do better."

She looked at him, wounded and eyes bleary and bloodshot. "You know, everyone *loves* telling me that. I can do better at school, have better friends, every-fucking-thing. Maybe I *can't*. Maybe I don't *WANT* to do better because I really, really like what I choose to have."

Billy swallowed hard, unconsciously gripping her tighter. He wasn't someone who people chose.

"You wanna go to prom? I'll go with you," he finally said, meeting her eyes. "We'll go to California. And Florida. You want me to call you my girlfriend? Fine, I can do that. But I can't promise anything more than that, Chris, because it's just gonna hurt you in the long run."

"Do you love me?" A soft, breathy question that only served to disguise a proclamation of her own.

Yes. A thousand times yes. "I don't know."

"D-Do you think you could ever love me?"

The way she asked made it feel as if his whole room had collapsed on his chest. For a moment, he regretted every soft touch and kiss, every breath against her skin as they slept. If he had just kept it together, kept her at an arm's length like he'd initially planned, she wouldn't be asking in the first place. His heart wouldn't be shattering as he lied to her face.

'Could you ever love me?'

"Yes." Falling for her was the best and worst thing to ever happen to him. Everything he felt was multiplied. It made him giddy and goddamn *miserable*, and that was precisely why everything in him screamed to let the girl go before he ruined her.

She breathed out the quietest, most resigned '*okay'* , wiping more tears from her face.

"Um," she said, biting her lip to keep back more tears, "I, uh, I think I

want to go home."

His face fell, unsure of what to say. "Chris, I really don't want you to go, can we just—"

"Billy, please, can you just take me home?"

He swallowed hard, leaning his head against her shoulder before nodding. "Yeah. Get your stuff."

Her trapper keeper and books had been gathered, clothes back on, hair and makeup fixed in an effort to erase any evidence of their tryst and fight. Outside his room, he heard voices; Susan and Neil had returned. *Great.* Another obstacle when he just wanted this day to end. He opened the door, Chrissy slipping past him with the hope that their presence wouldn't be noticed until the front door closed behind them.

It was an empty hope. Susan had been fiddling with something in the other room, catching a glimpse of them just as his hand cupped the doorknob.

"Oh, hi, Chrissy!" Susan said pleasantly, walking up to the two of them. "You're staying for dinner tonight?"

"No," he answered, fidgeting with the keys in his pocket. "I was just about to drive her home."

"Maybe some other time." Chrissy's voice was soft, barely holding it together in the presence of his parents.

"Sweetie, are you okay?" Susan asked, finally catching a glimpse of the brunette's expression.

"My mom called," Chrissy lied, her eyes flitting up to Susan, then Billy, before focusing on her hands. "She, um, said my grandma passed, and I just really need to go be with them."

"Sorry to hear that, Christina," Neil offered. Billy hated the way her name sounded in his mouth, the sweetness sucked right out. "Wish we could've met under better circumstances."

Susan gave a sympathetic look, pulling Chrissy into a small hug. He'd almost forgotten how friendly his stepmother and Chrissy were to each other, Susan always chatting with her for a few minutes when she called. "If you or your parents need anything, you just let us know."

"Thanks."

The drive home was devoid of conversation. It wasn't silent by any means; Chrissy had found one of her tapes she'd left in the Camaro and was blasting the hell out of it. He held back a groan as Material Girl came on, not willing to further upset Chrissy. She practically worshipped the ground Madonna walked on, and if she felt better singing along, he'd gladly take the ruined vibes of his car. Besides, he had an inkling that this was her trying to push his buttons one last time before they said goodnight.

Street lights flickered on as the Camaro roared down Elm Street, coming to a stop in front of the DiMartino house. The two teens sat in for a moment, Billy slowly turning down the music, unable to look at her for fear of her bursting into tears again. It was an awful feeling, knowing he'd been the one to bring her to tears.

She unbuckled her seatbelt, leaning over to rest her head on his shoulder. A hand grabbed his own, fingers slipping in the negative spaces between his own. His skin felt like it was on fire. He prayed she'd keep her hand in his, to let her warmth devour any coldness left in him that could hurt her again.

As he prayed, her lips met his, a token of forgiveness despite the still hurt feelings. There was liberation in her kiss, unabashed love, all the things he was afraid to take for himself for fear of it crumbling in his grasp. He would let himself indulge in all her sweetness as long as she would allow.

Chrissy pulled her mouth away from his, searching his heavy lidded

gaze for some sort of clarity before speaking. “Do you love me?”

He hesitated far longer than he should have.

“I don’t know.”

Chrissy’s eyes bored holes into his head, studying him before grabbing her school things from the ground. “Liar.”

And she was gone.

Billy had pulled into his spot next to his father’s truck a few minutes ago, but couldn’t bring himself to leave the car just yet. Arms folded over the steering wheel, his head resting on them as he breathed softly, Madonna still playing softly over the speakers. The pit in his stomach just seemed to grow as time passed, the disappointment in himself turning to a blazing anger with no release in sight besides the tears prickling in his eyes.

He blinked a few times, willing them away before getting out of the car. The door closed with too forceful of a slam, echoing as he made his way up the stairs to the back door.

The house was filled with noise, the TV rattling off the evening news, Susan boiling pasta for their meal in the kitchen, and music drifting from the crack under Max’s door. *Fuck.* He’d forgotten Max was home the entire time, that she’d probably heard the yelling and crying coming from his room. Another blow up the kid didn’t need to witness. He blew a curl from his face, taking off his denim jacket as he went to his room.

There were times he was thankful he had the bedroom in the front of the house. Sneaking back in late at night was easy enough, and it was far enough from everyone else to have late night conversations with Chrissy without disturbing the rest of the house. Then there were times like this where he regretted not taking Max’s room, far enough away to avoid his father when he settled on the couch.

“Are you going to explain the map I found in your room?” Neil asked as he reached his door, the calm in his voice edged by the anger that always hung just underneath.

“Why were you in my room?” Billy asked indignantly. Right now was not the time for his dad’s *bullshit* and snooping.

“Did you knock up the DiMartino girl?”

“What?”

“I said,” the older man said slowly, “did you knock up the DiMartino girl? She may be a better liar than you are, but I still know a lie when I see one. I can easily call her parents to send my condolences about her grandmother.”

Billy froze, looking down at the gnarls in the polished hardwood. His father shifted, turning off the TV. Susan had made her way from the kitchen, hanging back a bit to observe the interrogation.

“Or,” Neil continued, “you can tell me the truth as to why you’re planning to go back to California. Which, I’m thinking is because you messed up and got her pregnant.”

“That’s not—”

“Look at me when you’re talking to me.”

Billy met his father’s eyes, jaw set as he swallowed hard. “I didn’t get her pregnant. We’re just planning a roadtrip to Cali.”

Susan let out a rush of air, a silent ‘*Oh thank goodness*’, before trying to divert the conversation. “That sounds like fun. When are you two planning to go?”

“End of summer,” he said flatly.

“For how long?” came Neil’s question.

“A week, plus the drive.”

“So why was she so upset when you two left?” Again, that unsettling

calmness. Billy felt his whole body seize up.

“It was just a stupid fight. None of your business.”

“If you want to keep seeing that girl, you tell me what you did to upset her.”

“Neil,” Susan tried, “they’re kids. They’re going to have lovers spats from time to time—”

“William.” Neil’s voice only made Billy grit his teeth further, the hot tears forming back in his eyes.

“We had a fight about prom,” he finally blurted out, eyes flitting down to the floor and back to his father before he had a chance to berate him about eye contact again. “I thought it was stupid and I didn’t want to go, and she got upset. That’s it.”

Neil didn’t seem fully convinced by the explanation, but seemed to allow it. He turned the television back on, leaning back into the sofa. Billy looked at Susan, who was staring at him with those doleful eyes, begging her to believe him.

“Are you going, then?” Susan asked softly. *I believe you. I’ll try to make it better.*

“Yeah.”

“Well, you’ll have to get a tux and a corsage. Tell Chrissy to let me know what color her dress is and we can go and pick them out,” she smiled, the expression tight on her pale face. “It’ll be fun, right, honey?”

The older Hargrove eyed up his son, before nodding. “It’ll be a change of pace for him.”

“Can I go now?” Billy asked, his voice meeker than he had wanted.

Neil nodded again. “Dinner should be done soon. Clean up your room, while you’re at it.”

16. in the aftermath

Arguments were never out of character for Billy and Chrissy. The two seemed to always have some sort of disagreement brewing, but it never devolved into the yelling and crying Max had heard on the other side of Billy's door. She'd caught it all by mistake. Leaving the sanctuary of her room for a soda, Max had heard the heated conversation.

"Manipulative bitch—"

"You don't get to be jealous of Steve—"

The redhead stood in the threshold of the living room, her feet anchored by dread and the memories of her mom and dad, her *real* dad, swirling in her head like tendrils of smoke. The subject of their arguments were totally different, but the sound was just the same.

Stop, she willed. Just stop and move on.

It was with the first wail from Chrissy hit her ears that the cement around her ankles at last broke to pieces. Max ran back into her room, slamming the door as hard as she could. Maybe a reminder that she was still here, that she was a witness to their discord, would bring it to an end.

On went the headphones and up went the volume on her Walkman. Waiting these things out was an unfortunate specialty Max had acquired.

A hand rapped at her bedroom door what seemed like ages later. She removed her headphones, sitting up in her bed.

"Yeah?"

"We're home, Max," came her mom's voice. *"I'm making rigatoni tonight, some help would be appreciated when you're done with homework."*

"Okay," she answered, praying her voice would come out normal, devoid of the residual panic she had. It seemed to, as her mom's

footsteps left the area. Max blew out a long sigh, turning back to her magazine.

Chrissy was rarely in the Hargrove house long enough to talk to their parents. She wasn't sure if it was by Billy's request, or if she was uncomfortable with meeting them in person despite her friendly rapport with Susan. Either way, when Max had heard Neil speak her name, her mom's comforting tones, she knew something was really, really wrong. It only took another minute before the front door closed loudly, and another door near it to open.

Max sat at the door, hoping to overhear whatever her mom and Neil were discussing in the kitchen.

"Leave it to my son bring home a girl who lies to my face the first time I meet her."

"Neil, you don't know that."

"How do you explain the maps, Susan? He's running away, just like he always does, and he's dragged her into it somehow. I have a mind to take that damn car away again."

Max's face hardened. Billy hadn't told their parents about the trip yet? It'd been the constant thing he and Chrissy talked about. She'd had pangs of jealousy that he was going home, even for a visit. If she asked nice enough, Chrissy probably would have convinced him to let her come with.

Maybe he wasn't planning on coming back. That hadn't occurred to her. Billy would graduate in a few short weeks, he'd be free to leave at his own volition. Something about that realization hit Max square in the gut. If he left, she'd be alone in this house without an ally.

"You don't think she's pregnant, do you, Neil?" The worry in her mother's voice hit Max again.

It's just a trip! Max wanted to scream. *It isn't happening for months! If they wanted to run away, they would've left by now!*

Billy had a better chance to run than she ever had. Not that she hadn't tried, hadn't thought about taking a Greyhound to LA to her

dad's apartment. She had roots here now, though. Lucas. El. Dustin. Will. Hell, even Mike, who could still be an ass to her at times. For every moment she thought about leaving, she remembered how much she loved her friends. Billy didn't seem to have that.

She stood up, climbing back on her bed before shoving the headphones back over her ears. Whatever happened to upset Chrissy was a problem from here and now, not the awaited trip. Adults were so stupid, ignorant. She couldn't listen to the speculation any longer.

Max only hoped that Billy would fix whatever happened. She liked Chrissy too much to see her go at this point.

Her first mistake was slamming the door. The second mistake was not saying hello to Wes or her mom before storming upstairs. Her third mistake was slamming her bedroom door shut. All these little mistakes meant eventually her solitude would be interrupted by one parent or another, and she wasn't sure she could bear that right now.

Knees curled under her chin, hair slipping down her shoulder, tickling at her leg. Everything about her felt heavy, so much so that she felt one movement more and she would crash through the floor. All she wanted was to sink into nonexistence, to be rid of the gnawing in her gut and the stupid paisley comforter she hated and the—

A knock came to her door, interrupting her thoughts.

"Chris? Can I come in?" *Mom.*

There was a long pause. The desire to be alone was trumped by the sudden need for comforting. "Yeah."

The door clicked open, Patty DiMartino looking into the room tentatively before stepping in and closing the door behind her. Chrissy barely gave her a glance before returning her stare to the swirling paisley of her bedspread.

As a child, everyone had told her parents how much she resembled her father in mind and body. Adolescence and young adulthood had morphed her more into her mother, and she had resented the new comparison for many years. Now she only hoped she'd be as pretty and unmarred by age and heavy matters of the heart as her mom. Maybe she'd gain some of her patience and humility.

"Baby, are you okay?" The bed squeaked as her mother sat next to her. "You looked so upset when you came in, I was worried."

Chrissy shrugged, her crumpling face betraying the cool she was attempting to exude. Her mother's tender words only made the whole situation worse. How many times had she cried to her about some other boy who had broken her heart? This felt different, far more complicated than her mother was equipped to help with.

A breath hitched in her throat, a sob threatening to escape. The arms that had held her thousands of times over her eighteen years wrapped around her. It was enough to start the cascade of tears again.

"Oh, sweetheart," her mom crooned.

"I'm so stupid."

"No you aren't, Christina. Don't say that."

"You're only saying that because you *have* to."

"Did something happen with you and Billy?"

Chrissy could only muster a nod against her mother's chest. The words just wouldn't come amidst the hiccuping sobs. All the hurt and anger boiled over again, scorching every last fiber of her being.

"Did you two break up?" her mother tried again, attempting to coax any information she could use out. Anything to better try to soothe the crying mess of a daughter in her arms.

"No," she managed to choke out. "He finally said I was his girlfriend and asked me to prom, but it *sucked*."

"I... don't understand," came the gentle answer. "Why?"

Chrissy leaned away from her mother's grasp, falling back onto the plush comforter in an effort to collect herself. Palms rubbed at her eyes, smearing the remainder of her mascara in streaks on her hands.

"He only did it because I got mad." Another lump formed in her throat, threatened to choke her if she didn't let it out. "It's stupid and shitty, and... and... that's not how I wanted it to happen. He should want to be with me and do dumb teenager stuff with me because he *wants* to."

A hand brushed a few stray strands of hair from her face, the soothing touch finally doing its work. Her body relaxed into the mattress, eyes screwing shut as her mother's thumb rubbed away the makeup around her eyes.

"Baby, he doesn't seem to be a very... conventional person. I don't know if it's good for either of you to be in a relationship if he's uncomfortable with it. Maybe it's better if you two just stayed friends."

Ouch. She had expected her mom's advice to be a little off the mark, but suggesting she entirely give up what little ground she had won hurt deep.

"I don't want to be 'just friends,'" Chrissy mumbled, trying her hardest not to let her voice crack.

The older woman sighed through her nose, leaning back on her hands. They sat in silence for a few seconds, Chrissy's numb gaze locked on the popcorn ceiling. "You're still taking your birth control at the exact same time every day, right?"

"Ma, ew." Chrissy shot her a horrified look before covering her face with her hands.

"I wasn't born yesterday, Christina," her mom said flatly.

The brunette let out a groan, rolling over onto her stomach as her mother continued to talk. "All I'm saying is, if you two are going to be intimate—"

"MOM."

"—you have to safe and smart about it. Especially if you two are going to be alone on the other side of the country."

"Just *please* stop talking," came the muffled response.

A 'pfft' came from beside her, prompting a glare from Chrissy. The older DiMartino woman's face was wrinkled into a soft smile. Her hand, gorgeous and freshly manicured, swept back through her daughter's hair, thawing the look on Chrissy's face.

"Is he good to you?" she asked, the smile fading into a more serious face, concern swirling in her brown eyes.

It was well warranted, she supposed, after the fiasco with Roy. The VD rumor had gotten bad enough by the end of her sophomore year that the school counselor got involved, and so did her parents. It had been the most humiliating week of her life, but at the end of it she had proof she was clean, a prescription for the Pill, and a renewed ability to confide in her mother.

Chrissy's hazel eyes lingered on her mom's face, nodding before picking at her own chipping blue nail polish. "Yeah. He's good to me."

Her mother bent down and planted a soft kiss on her head, tucking a few permed strands behind Chrissy's ear. "Do you feel up to joining us for dinner? I made pulled pork sandwiches, your favorite."

"Not especially," Chrissy admitted.

"That's okay. I'll fix you a plate and leave it in the fridge," her mom said, standing up and walking to the door. "Just make sure you eat something tonight."

"Yup."

Before she closed the door, she gave Chrissy one last look. "Love you, baby."

"Love you too, Mama."

17. another rumor

News travelled fast in the halls of Hawkins High School.

Steve Harrington was no stranger to the gossip. He'd been the subject of it quite a few times, joined in and spread his fair share of information to other interested classmates. This particular news, if you could call it that, felt different. He'd felt queasy watching it unfold.

Homeroom : Whispers of a spat that threatened their relationship. Chrissy's name, then Billy's.

2nd period: One of Chrissy's other friends let it slip that Billy had come looking for her. Chrissy and Annette hadn't shown that morning.

3rd period: Steve watched as Chrissy slouched in her seat. Señora Russell had even remarked about the lack of chatter coming from the brunette.

Lunch: All seemed normal, if you didn't look too closely. Tommy and Carol were making fools of themselves again, Billy and Chrissy cracking up. The absence of the multiple warnings from the lunch aides about personal space tipped him off that something was for sure amidst.

5th period: He finally pulled Annette aside, heading to the back of the school instead of their English class.

"Spill," he said after Annette had plopped onto the cement steps.

"Spill what?" she asked, trying to feign ignorance and boredom.

“Why is Chris acting so weird today? She was so out of it in Spanish that Señora Russell promised no quiz tomorrow if she kept quiet all class. Guess who doesn’t have a conjugating verbs quiz tomorrow?”

“Hey, good for you guys! Maybe I should try that in US History. Chrissy *never* shuts up. Mr. Westerback would have an aneurysm.”

“Annette.”

“Fine, fine, fine.” The blonde girl blew out a sigh, leaning back against the wall. “She really didn’t go into detail, but I guess they had a big fight last night. We skipped homeroom and got breakfast so she didn’t have to see him till English. They seemed fine at lunch, though.”

“They’re practically in each other’s laps at lunch. I saw her touch him *once* the whole time,” Steve said.

“You were *watching* them? What, did Byers finally rub off on you, Stevie?”

“I told you to stop calling me that,” he said, exasperated. “I-I wasn’t watching them. I sit, like, a table away and it’s hard not to see them slobbering over each other. And Jonathan’s not a creep.”

“Yeah, okay, that was a little weird,” Annette admitted. “But I thought they just wanted the lunch aides off their back.”

“Did she say what, y’know, happened?” he tried again, sliding down the wall to sit on the blacktop.

“Like I said, she was real vague about it. All I could get out of her was that part of it was about prom.” Annette pursed her lips, pushing her new perm out of her face. “She said yesterday during school if he wasn’t going to take her, she’d find someone else to. I’m guessing she told him that and he flipped out.”

“What? Why?”

“Ask her yourself.” The blonde nodded towards something behind him.

Steve turned his head to see Chrissy rounding the corner of the school, fumbling with a lighter and her pack of Golds as she walked towards them. The plastic fell from her hands, clattering to the ground.

“Fuck,” she mumbled, bending down to grab it and light the cigarette dangling from her lips. She looked up, finally noticing the two of them sitting in her usual spot. “Oh, come on.”

“Hey,” he offered, giving a half-hearted wave.

“I’m really not in the mood for company right now,” Chrissy said flatly, stuffing her things back in her jean jacket.

“Too bad,” chirped Annette. “It’s your own fault for crashing your own intervention.”

“Intervention?”

“It’s not an intervention,” Steve said quickly, shooting a dirty look at Annette. “You’ve just been acting weird all day and I was just checking if you were all right.”

“Well, I’m right here,” she said, blowing out a stream of smoke. Annette reached for the cigarette, which Chrissy let her have. “Ask me.”

“Okay,” he said slowly, trying to decipher the look on her face. “So... Are you doing okay?”

“Never been better,” came the short, sarcastic answer.

Okay, he thought, I deserved that one. His hands wandered to a few weeds poking out from the cracks in the cement, fingers wrapping around them as he measured his next words. “So, you and Billy aren’t having a fight that definitely wasn’t about prom?”

“Annette!” The anger in her voice was palpable. “That was a private conversation, I can’t believe y—”

“He was concerned!” Annette said sheepishly. “If you wanna be mad at someone, be mad at Linda. She’s been telling everyone and their

mother that you two are fighting.”

Steve rarely saw Chrissy angry about anything. He wondered if he would've seen it more if they hadn't drifted as friends the past few years. There was no treading back away from this sore spot now that he had involved himself in it, though.

“Okay, look, it’s not her fault, Chris,” he tried to reason, picking out a few of the green weeds from the ground. “I’m the one who kind of cornered her.”

“You still should’ve just asked me instead of her.”

“Would you have actually told me what’s going on?”

“Yes.” There was a pause. “No. I mean, maybe, but it would’ve sucked way less if you came to me.”

“Yeah, and I said I was sorry. So,” he said, standing up, “are you gonna tell me yourself, or do I have to keep pulling it out of Annette? Which, by the way, she is not a good storyteller and I’m still *extremely* lost as to what is going on.”

He watched as her jaw set, eyes flitting away from his as she fidgeted. Chrissy took another drag, the smoke hissing out her nose as she exhaled.

“Fine,” she finally said. “I asked Billy about prom, and he said he didn’t want to go, so I said I’d ask you to go with me instead.”

Steve’s eyes widened, mouth opening and closing as the words came and left his mind. “You *what?*”

“Like, as friends. And I only said it because I thought it’d piss him off enough to go with me.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s not helpful at all, man,” he said, his voice rising with every word. The last thing he needed after making peace with Hargrove was a reason to get his ass beat again. “And why did you think I’d go with you?! I already have a date!”

“Ooh, who?” Annette piped up.

"Jodie Sadler, but that's besides the point—"

"It didn't work anyway, okay?" Chrissy said, cutting him off. "He yelled at me and we got into a fight about some other stupid stuff. And-and then I started crying, and I guess now we're officially together and he's taking me to prom? But it doesn't matter because I every time I think about it or see him I feel like garbage."

He and Annette were silent. His face was a mixture of surprise and utter confusion, still having a hard time understanding how those two had gone in reverse from a breakup fight to actually dating.

"Well, uh," he started slowly, blowing out air through his puckered lips. "Hmm."

"At least you're going to prom?" Annette said, trying hard to sound perky. Chrissy shot her a dirty look, flicking the butt of her cigarette onto the cement.

"Do you... want a hug?" Steve offered.

It was all he could think of in the moment to make her feel the tiniest bit better. That's what he always tried to do, take care of people. Protect them. It didn't always work out or go as planned, but he seemed to manage it pretty well. This seemed far below the level he was used to operating this past year, so with any luck Chrissy would be okay with a little Harrington magic.

"Sure," Chrissy mumbled.

He wrapped his arms around the shorter brunette, letting her settle in his embrace. She didn't reciprocate right away, but as he hugged her tighter, her arms wrapped around his middle.

"You're gonna squeeze the life out of me," she joked, after a few seconds. Steve let go, giving her a grin.

"Hey, do you want to do something tonight?" Annette's voice was hopeful. "We could go to the diner and make my brother give us his discount. Or if Steve's parents are cool with it, we could go swimming."

"Yeah, totally!" Steve agreed, snapping his fingers and pointing at Annette. She could be a genius when she wanted. "Whatever you want, we'll get your mind off everything."

"Yeah, sure," came her answer, the tone of her voice blasé. "I could go for some cheese fries, courtesy of Dean the Machine. Swimming's off the table though, my swimsuit is trashed from Tammy's birthday last year and I haven't bought a new one."

"Whatever. Diner sounds good to me," he shrugged.

"And then you," Annette said, pinching his cheek as she stood to pass him, "can explain how this thing with Jodie Sadler came to be."

Chrissy gave a sly smile. "Yeah, I'm curious about that too. Are nerd girls your thing now or...?"

"Yeah, I'm branching out," he joked, giving her a slap on the back before following Annette. "C'mon, I've got a test next class and *you* have a bet to ruin for Annette."

"Wait, what?"

"He's talking out his ass, Chrissy," Annette called back. "But if you wanna keep being mopey through US History, by all means, feel free."

18. mall maggots

Billy was dying.

Okay, it was an extreme overreaction, but it certainly *felt* like he was. Chrissy was still acting distant when they were alone, and he hadn't gotten any action in the week since their fight. He hadn't gone this long without regular sex in three months. Billy knew she wasn't punishing him, that she just felt unsure and self-conscious, but god, did it feel like a fucking punishment.

And to top it off, they had agreed to hang out with Tommy and Carol on a double date. It had been fucking Carol's idea after Chrissy had slipped the word 'boyfriend' into conversation during lunch one day.

"Jesus, finally," Tommy laughed in the smarmy way that made Billy want to smack the freckles off his face. He opted instead to just glower at him. "We were about to take bets on how long you two would keep up the whole 'we're just friends' bullshit."

"Who asked who?" Carol asked, eagerly leaning forward on the lunch table.

"It was a mutual decision," Billy said, bored of the conversation already.

"Wow, the romance is overwhelming," she deadpanned as Tommy snickered. "Not like you guys have much time to talk with your tongues down each other's throats."

"Like you can talk," Chrissy spoke up, a bemused look on her face.

"Tommy and I have a deep connection, we don't need to talk to know what each other's thinking."

"Oh yeah, I bet it goes *real* deep," Billy smirked. Tommy, to Carol's chagrin, only laughed and reached over for a high five. The blonde obliged, watching as Jeremy and Annette tried their best to choke down the laughter. Chrissy bit down on her lip, trying to keep her

own giggles under control.

“I think you two *settling* for each other calls for a celebration,” Carol said, pushing her own boyfriend as he continued to cackle. “We should do a group date. You guys, me and Tommy, and Jeremy and Annette.”

“Uh, count us out,” Annette said, taking a bite of her sandwich. “My mom caught Chrissy and me skipping Monday morning and I’m now grounded till I die.”

“Aw, bummer,” Carol said, not a hint of actual sympathy in her voice. “You’re still free, right Chris?”

“Um,” she said, eyes flashing to Billy. He willed with all his might for her to just say no, to lie and say she got grounded as well. “Yeah. The parentals don’t really care if I’m not in homeroom.”

Dammit. Billy poked at the mashed potatoes on his tray. Being forced to breathe the same air as Carol was bad enough. Having to spend his free time with her and Tommy while they silently judged how much of a couple he and Chrissy were seemed like pure torture. He’d rather sit silently at home, stone cold sober.

“Let’s go to Indy,” Tommy suggested. “There’s nothing to do here.”

“That sounds like a good time,” Chrissy said, her eyes lighting up. She gave him a hopeful look, which only served to build a pit in his stomach. He couldn’t say no to that face, to the potential to leave all the crap he’d caused behind them. They hadn’t been on an actual date since they had gone bowling, anyway.

“Whatever.” He shrugged, taking a bite of his lunch. He pointed straight at Tommy, locking his serious eyes on the freckled bastard. “I expect gas money though.”

And so, here he was, on the cusp of a cool April afternoon on

Saturday, pulling up to Chrissy's house. Billy sat for a few seconds after he cut the engine. He could just turn the car back on and drive home. Tell everyone that he came down with a sudden, horribly contagious sickness that would last all of the weekend. Hell, he could just try to convince Chrissy to go to Indianapolis with him without picking up Tommy and Carol.

While he had been weighing his last-minute options, the brunette had trotted down the steps of her house. His train of thought was only broken by the impatient pulling on the passenger door handle. He looked at her, an annoyed look on her face, eyebrows raised.

"You gonna open the door or not?" came the slightly muffled question.

Licking his upper lip and sighing in equal annoyance, he clicked the lock open. As she settled in, he gave her a once over. Her hair had been pulled back with a giant hair clip, her long bangs falling in her face as she buckled herself in. The item of notice, however, was his tank top she was wearing, knotted to the side to give a slimmer fit. A swell of pride grew in him, biting his lip.

"Nice shirt," he grinned.

"Thanks," she answered with an equally big grin. "I got it from this real cute guy. Blonde, has an earring, is allergic to buttoning his shirt all the way. You might know him."

He let out a laugh, leaning over to give her a kiss. He felt her melt against him for what felt like the first time in ages, their familiar heat budding between them as they exchanged hurried kisses. All of a sudden, Chrissy pulled away, sitting back in the passenger seat. The little whine she let out as she pulled away was enough to make his erection painfully present again his jeans. It was like he was back at square one, waiting for her signal; for her skin against his that he'd been missing for days.

"Why would you do that?" she whined. The look on her face clearly shared his own frustration. "You know we have to go pick up Tommy and Carol."

"We can be real quick," he said breathlessly. "I can pull over somewhere and we can —"

"I really, *really* want to say yes to that, but those two are like bloodhounds," she said, staring up at the ceiling of the Camaro. "I'm not in the mood to have them crack jokes about how the car smells like sex all the way there."

"Who cares what those assholes think? It's my fucking car."

"Billy," she groaned, her feet stomping on the mat under her. "You're making this harder than it needs to be. Just go get them."

He sat back in his seat before he turned the car back on. His palm slammed against the steering wheel, his frustration having to go *somewhere* for the time being before he sped off in the direction of Tommy's house.

Billy realized he hadn't been to a mall in a while, probably since he left California. He could think of a dozen other activities he'd rather be doing than shopping (rather, following the girls around while he and Tommy amused themselves), but it would take convincing the others and he really didn't have the fight in him right now.

The worst part had been Macy's. Chrissy and Carol were showing each other the prom dresses they had picked. It was a reminder that he had three weeks left to find a tux and order the flower thing Susan had mentioned.

The best part had been a tie between Sam Goody and Victoria's Secret. He'd picked up a few new tapes, including the new Slayer album he'd been eyeing. The girls gave them strict instructions to stay out of the store full of unmentionables, but that didn't stop him from ogling the goods or tucking away thoughts of Chrissy modeling a few sets for later use.

They'd stopped at Bresler's after Chrissy had pointed it out. He and

Tommy forked over a few dollars in order to make the girls happy, Carol and Chrissy walking away giggling with their respective frozen yogurt and mint chocolate chip cone in hand.

"Can you believe those two?" Tommy said, grabbing his malt from the lady behind the counter. "They drag us to Victoria's Secret, make us stand outside, and don't even buy anything to make it worth our while. And now we gotta pay for their ice cream, which Carol's gonna bitch about going to her thighs all week. She barely *has* thighs. She's a twig."

If his slack face was any indication, he really didn't care, nor was he listening. He dropped the loose change into the tip jar, taking his own ice cream before finding where the two mouthy ones had wandered off to. A light tap on his arm and he looked at Tommy, who was pointing in the girls' general direction.

As they sauntered their way over to the table the girls had acquisitioned, Billy couldn't help but zero in on Chrissy, whose tongue was making quick work of the melting ice cream trying to escape the cone. An all too familiar ache anchored itself in his core, and it seemed no matter how much he tried to ignore it, it only consumed him more. Chrissy caught his stare, taking another lick of her ice cream without breaking eye contact. As if she couldn't be more of a colossal tease than she already was. She was baiting him and, from the glint in her eye, she was loving every second of it.

In that moment, he was pretty sure he hated her a little. Watching those stupid pretty lips part to take a lick of ice cream when he wanted nothing more than them to be wrapped around his—

"So are we seeing a movie or not?"

Billy dragged his gaze away from Chrissy long enough to look at Tommy, who was looking at *him* like he had the last say. Which was unsurprising considering Tommy's complete lack of ability to do anything but follow him like a lost dog. He'd probably done the same to Harrington before Billy dethroned him.

"Yeah, sure."

"I think we should see *The Breakfast Club*," Carol announced.

"But *Weird Science* sounds way funnier," Tommy said, taking a drawn out sip of his malt.

"You never want to see what I want!" The redhead whined, loud enough to get a few looks.

Christ , as if he didn't already dislike her enough, she was going to make a scene to fuel his ever-growing hatred. For every time he had thought Chrissy was obnoxious and whiny, he silently apologized. *This bitch takes the cake.*

"Trade with me," Chrissy suddenly said, hand outstretched to him. "I wanna try yours."

Billy rolled his eyes, swapping his cone for hers. "I want that back, you know."

"Chrissy, what do you wanna see?" Carol asked pointedly. Billy knew that there was only one right answer, and it probably was in all of their best interests to just cave to the redhead.

"*Weird Science* sounds stupid," she shrugged, taking a lick of the ice cream she'd taken from Billy. Her face screwed into disgust. "Ugh, what the hell is that? It tastes disgusting."

"Butter pecan."

"Billy, which movie—"

"What are you, an old man?" Chrissy said, cutting Carol off. She handed back the offending treat, taking back her pale green monstrosity.

"Look who's talking. What are you, twelve?" he teased back. "And *The Breakfast Club*. I've seen *Weird Science* already."

Tommy let out a childish groan as Carol clapped her hands in celebration of her victory. The two of them were being contrary just for the sake of it, and it only further annoyed him that these two knuckleheads were wasting his precious Saturday.

It wasn't like any of them would be concentrating much on the movie anyway.

Billy's arm slung around her shoulder felt like fire. Not in the way it had felt the past week, with the discomfort over their fight making any touch feel foreign. Instead, in the charged way only a deprivation of a familiar touch she had started craving again would burn. The previews had come and gone, and as if on cue, Tommy and Carol were already getting way too handsy for comfort. The theater wasn't full by any means, but it was populated enough that Chrissy wasn't going to risk being caught to quell the screaming need tearing her up.

It's fine . If she just repeated it enough in her head, maybe her body would get the message. *I wanted to see this, anyway. It's totally fine.*

She made the mistake of glancing over to Billy, his profile lit by the screen. The sheer concentration in his face made it abundantly clear that he was telling the same lie to himself. Chrissy leaned further into his body, resting her head on his chest as her feet propped up on the empty seat in front of her.

"I'm pretty sure Bender is just you if you were an idiot," she whispered, looking up at the blonde.

"I'd say you're the weird girl, but your brand of crazy is harder to translate to the big screen," he whispered back, a smirk on his face. Chrissy smacked him on the chest, a stifled laugh vibrating from his chest to her ear. As he settled against her, the thump from his heart grew clear in the lulls of the movie.

All at once, it became too hard to hold back anymore. Her hand gripped at his t-shirt, pulling him down to her level to meet eager lips. He returned her kiss with gusto, his calloused fingers raking through her hair before grabbing hold at the base of her head. A thousand needles pricked at her insides, constant reminders of the nagging desire that had plagued them all day. For a minute, she

regretted not saying yes to a quickie before picking up their friends.

"You wanna get out of here?" she whispered against his cheek.

He didn't need any convincing. Wordlessly, Billy stood up, grasping her hand to pull her through the seats. Tommy and Carol hadn't even noticed their absence.

The mall was too busy to find a secluded place to continue where they started. Billy had suggested a fitting room or one of the single bathrooms—which, honestly, the thought of going at it in a public bathroom made Chrissy want to barf—but the two had settled on going back to their favorite place, the Camaro.

Thank god the passenger side had still been pushed forward after letting Tommy and Carol out of the car. Billy's jean jacket draped over the side of the seat, his ribbed tank top clinging to him in ways that only served to excite Chrissy further. She kissed him again, hard, squealing as he practically *threw* her into the back seat. The slam of the door echoed, dull in her ears that pulsed with the sound of her own heartbeat.

"Why the fuck did you wear pants today?" he muttered, yanking them down her thighs along with the emerald green panties she *may or may not* have just stolen from Victoria's Secret during her and Carol's raid.

"Didn't really think easy access was necessary," Chrissy gasped, feeling his hot mouth against her collarbone again.

"It's always necessary, babe." *Babe*. She melted a little at the pet name thrown so easily her way.

Chrissy had come to the conclusion that this rough fuck was the equivalent of makeup sex between them. She'd never had makeup sex. Boys were always long gone by the time she had craved them again, locked out of her heart forever. All of this was new and

exciting, a frantic and hormonal apology to one another.

He had busied himself with undoing his jeans, slipping a condom on as she fumbled with her own pants. Not that it mattered. With one fluid motion, her legs were slung over his shoulder, jeans still rumpled around her knees. Blonde curls fell in his face as he steadied himself against her opening. A lovely groan left his mouth as he entered her, filling her so completely that she felt she couldn't breathe. There was no slow build up this time, just his hips slamming against her as his hand gripped her knee to keep her in place. For all the sweetness he was capable of giving, Chrissy was always willing and ready for the Billy that went fast and hard.

"Jesus fuck, you weren't this tight before," he noted in between his panting and grunts. A wicked grin played on his face. "Don't tell me I stretched you o—"

"Shut up," she breathed, her grip on his thigh tightening.

That was enough to get another barrage of thrusts deep in her, eliciting a succession of halted moans. It didn't take long for her to freefall into an orgasm that knocked the breath out of her, the last thing intelligible thing out of her a moan dripping with his name. It seemed to only fuel him further, furiously chasing his own end without a care to how damn *sensitive* everything about her felt right now.

Chrissy let out a whine as she squirmed against him, feeling him ram into her a few more times as his eyebrows knit together. That intense, gorgeous face that signalled his release looked down at her as he finally came with one last lazy thrust. It didn't matter how many girls had seen it before she came into the picture; it was all hers now.

The ridiculousness of their position dawned on her in the afterglow, him panting with her jeans digging into his shoulder, her stolen underwear slipping back down around her knees. He seemed to notice too, giving a lax smile as he set her legs back down on the seat cushion.

"Those new?" he asked, shimmying his jeans back up. She almost felt sad watching him buckle his belt, but quickly was comforted by the

idea of a repeat later tonight.

“Yep. Got ‘em today, courtesy of Victoria and her Secret.” She quickly slid them up her body, along with her jeans. God knows if anyone saw them, but Chrissy wasn’t willing to give an after show.

“You’re stealing underwear now?” he smirked.

“You put on a couple pairs and walk out, it’s pretty simple. Carol got a few new pairs herself.”

Billy rolled his eyes and reached into his jacket as she sat cross-legged on the seat, digging out his lighter and a cigarette. He handed them off to the brunette, letting her take the first few drags as he fiddled with his hair in the rearview mirror. As she handed off the cigarette to him, he graced her forehead with a kiss.

“Maybe we should do this again,” she mused. “Not fuck for a while, I mean.”

“No,” he answered, his voice so stern that Chrissy couldn’t help but burst out laughing. “I can’t go that long without you again.”

“Shit,” she said, feeling the back of her head. “Where did my hair clip go?”

Chrissy scooted away, searching around the back area of his car. Billy made no move to help her, which was slightly annoying, but he at least had the grace to lift his feet while she searched the floor of the Camaro.

“I swear, your car is like a black hole.”

“It is not, you’re just blind.”

“You never found my underwear from our first date,” she said pointedly. “And my Ray Bans are still missing. And so is my Cyndi Lauper tape I left in here.”

“Oh, that was yours? I tossed it when I was cleaning out my car,” he teased.

She smacked his shin, eliciting a loud “OW!” from the blonde as she continued to look under the seats. “I hate you.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“You owe me a new tape.”

“Jesus, I didn’t throw it out . It’s in my room.”

With a grunt, she lifted herself back to the seat, stealing the stick from between his lips for another drag before placing it back. With a sigh, she gave one last look at herself in the mirror before crawling over her boyfriend to open the door.

“What’s your hurry?” came Billy’s voice behind her.

“Tommy and Carol,” she said simply, climbing out.

“Oh shit, I almost forgot about them.” Billy followed suit, grabbing his jacket and putting it on as he locked the door.

“We should at least sit outside the theater and wait.”

“Can’t have Queen Carol thinking she was abandoned by her royal subjects.” Billy rolled his eyes, taking a drag as they snaked through the parking lot back to the beige building.

“Why do you hate her so much?” Chrissy asked, narrowing her eyes. “She’s not that bad, you know.”

“Do I need a reason? Besides,” he said, giving her a disaffected look, “you two talk shit about each other all the time. It’s not like you like her, either.”

“I do not!” Chrissy protested. “Discussing someone’s life choices out of concern is not the same as shit talking.”

“So, talking about how tacky her shoes are is you being concerned?” He flicked the butt to the cement, pulling her close as his arm slung around her shoulder. “You’ve got a warped brain, lady.”

“So, you bitching about how dumb Tommy is, that’s your idea of a

good friendship?"

"If I didn't let him hang around me, he'd find some meathead that'd get him in more trouble. I'm doing him a favor. Besides, he's fun to party with."

"Whatever," she muttered, ignoring the stifled chuckle coming from beside her. "They're *both* gonna be insufferable if we don't hurry."

Luck had been on their side. They'd found a free bench outside the movie theater entrance. Chrissy had draped her leg over Billy's own, reading through the liner notes on the new Prince tape she had snagged. Billy was flicking his lighter open and closed as boredom took him.

"See, I told you they didn't ditch us," Tommy's voice rang out from the gaggle of people.

"What the hell?" Carol shrilled, marching up to the other couple, Tommy rushing to catch up. "I look over halfway through the movie, and you two were gone."

"Had important business to attend to," Billy said simply, not taking his eyes off his lighter. Chrissy bit her lip, trying to keep in a laugh as she folded the laminated paper back into its case.

19. odd sleepover

One minute, life was as it should be, and the next, Hurricane Neil tore through, destroying everything in his path.

Max couldn't figure out how or when the storm began. She'd stayed the good kid, did her chores, came home on time. And yet, he was in her room, tossing every last thing she had gotten from Lucas these past four months into a black garbage bag.

"What are you doing?!" Her voice and the sheer anger dripping from it surprised her.

"If you won't listen, then perhaps a demonstration is more your speed, Maxine," Neil said calmly. "Your grades are slipping, and that boy you think you can parade around town with isn't doing you any favors. You think I don't know? You know what kind of person that makes you? A—"

The ugly word burned a hole in her soul. Never in a thousand years would she be able to forget the disgust and vitriol dripping in Neil's voice, directed at her and at Lucas.

Billy was home. She knew he was. She had seen him in the kitchen before heading to his room without a peep as she stood in her doorway, pleading with Neil not to throw away the pieces of her life. There was no brotherly protection, no interjection to the madness currently happening in her room. He was *letting* it happen, and Max could swear he was enjoying Neil's wrath turned on someone else for a change.

That was, until her mother's words echoed in her head.

The more we try, the worse it'll be for him.

If Billy attempted to intervene, there was no telling what the outcome could be for either of them. Max had gotten off with very little discipline from Neil, but the sudden team up against him could serve to unleash something they weren't prepared to deal with. It was better to turn up your music, try to focus on something else, and wait

it out.

She wasn't sure which one was true. Either way, it was torture.

Her mom had let her leave as a mercy. The harm was already done, the "lesson" learned. All she had to do was call and say where she was if she planned on sleeping over.

Her first thought was El.

Going to the boys wasn't even an option, with how rowdy and impulsive they were. They'd just make things worse in their own way and Lucas would be in danger.

But El's dad was a cop, the chief of frickin' police. The thought of having to face an adult with that kind of authority, who could see through her bullshitting, wasn't appealing either. Cops were a catalyst for more disaster.

Chrissy seemed like an okay choice. Her family didn't know her, so they couldn't really ask questions besides why a girl four years her junior was hanging out. And Chrissy could keep her mouth shut, she could lie if she needed to. Most importantly, she was safe.

Max had peeled down the road as fast has her bike would take her, skateboard tucked into her backpack with a few clothes and salvaged things from digging in the garbage while Neil wasn't looking. As she hit Elm Street, she felt a cinder block crash onto her heart, hoping with every fiber of her being that Chrissy would be home.

She rang the doorbell almost maniacally. As the door opened, she felt a little bad seeing the face looking down at her. It was Chrissy's mom, almost an older version of Chrissy. Max couldn't fathom Chrissy getting older; she seemed to be someone who would forever inhabit the person she was in the present.

"Can I help you?" the older woman asked, her smile polite and warm.

"I, uh." Her purpose seemed to be caught in her throat. "Is Chrissy home?"

"She is. Do you want to come inside? I'll call her down for you."

Max nodded. Chrissy's family home was beautiful, a brightly lit sea of trinkets and decorative wall hangings. These homes always were a sea, one that she always hoped would pull her out and never let her touch the shore again.

"Do you want anything to drink while you wait?" her mother asked gently. "A soda? I have Koolaid made, too."

"I'm fine, thanks," she said politely, hands gripping the strap of her backpack. *Were all moms this side of Hawkins like this?*

"All right. You can have a seat in the living room with Caitlin. I'm sure if you ask, she'll share her Goldfish with you."

Max nodded, shuffling her way into the living room where a girl, a few years younger than herself, was splayed on the carpet watching cartoons.

"Baby, this is Max. She's going to join you for a bit. Be. Nice." The last words were an instruction, punctuated with a look she'd gotten from her own mother quite a few times.

Caitlin looked at her. "Max is a boy's name."

"It's a girl's name too."

She settled on the couch, her things dropped at her feet with a plunk. Towards the direction of the staircase, she heard Chrissy's mom yell her daughter's name.

"Chrissy!" she yelled again, more urgent this time.

"What?! I'm *busy!*" Chrissy's voice rang out, the annoyance all too familiar, but somehow comforting in this unfamiliar land.

"You have company, get down here!"

"Are they always that loud?" Max asked the younger girl. Caitlin shrugged, not dignifying her question with an answer.

A thunder of footsteps came down the staircase, Chrissy's mother talking in too low of a voice to properly hear. Max heard her name, but that was it. Her bat-like hearing seemed to fail in the presence of people who *actually* knew how to keep their voices in hushed tones.

As if on cue, Chrissy walked into the living room, fresh faced and decked out in what Max could only assume was workout gear. She looked confused and a little worried, but it was to be expected.

"Max, hey," she said, walking towards her. "Why— What's up? You okay?"

"I, um, was wondering if we could just hang out for a while." Chrissy's concern only threatened to bring about the tears that had blurred her vision on the way here.

"Uh, yeah. Sure." She motioned for Max to follow her, grabbing her skateboard as a courtesy as the redhead stood. "My room's upstairs, way more privacy."

The door opened and Max was immediately assaulted by how girly the space was. Chrissy was girly, but the sheer amount of baby pink and stuffed animals seemed almost too childish for her. Chrissy's personality seemed to shine through with posters covering every inch of the wall above her bed and the dresser littered with candles and nail polish. It was like the room was trapped between two times in her life, the present fighting to gain ground.

Max instantly noticed the small TV blaring a Jane Fonda video as she set her bag down. God, she even had her own personal TV. Maybe she could convince her mom to buy her a portable one for her room for Christmas. The door closed with a soft *click*, Chrissy meandering over to the tv to stop the tape and shut off the set.

"Sorry for the mess," she said, gather up a few clothes scattered over her bed and floor.

"It's fine."

There was an awkward silence. Chrissy sat on her bed, patting at the paisley quit for Max to join her. The redhead obliged, pulling off her

shoes before hopping onto the mattress.

"Is everything okay?" Chrissy finally asked, her legs crossed under her. "Like, are you okay? Did something happen?"

"Yeah," came Max's tearful answer. She wasn't expecting the break in her voice, nor the sting of tears at her eyes so quickly. Maybe she just wasn't used to people noticing or caring.

"Shit," Chrissy breathed. "Hey, you wanna talk about it? Or we can just hang out and stuff. I don't wanna, like, interrogate you or anything."

"Neil went through my room," Max managed to say. "He went through my stuff and threw away all the stuff Lucas gave me. And... and he called Lucas something really bad."

"Jesus." The tone of her voice and the expression on her face only brought forth a new sting of tears. "I'm sorry, Max. I... don't really know what to say. Did you at least get some of it back?"

"A few notes and a bracelet."

"That's better than nothing, right?"

She supposed so. It wasn't like Chrissy had any experience with her belongings being discarded by others like they were trash. At least the older girl was attempting some kind of comfort. Max gave a nod, ginger hair falling in her face.

"So... you work out to Jane Fonda?" she asked after a pause. A tiny, sardonic smile played on her lips.

Chrissy shrugged tightening her ponytail at the back of her head. "It kills time, plus it gets me really toned. My thighs usually burn like hell after."

"That sounds like the least fun thing you can do with free time."

"Beauty is pain." Chrissy clicked her tongue, hopping off the bed to grab a few things. "And smelly. I'm gonna shower real quick, but after we can do whatever. I've got movies, nail polish, and like, a million

Cosmos. Pick something."

"Will do," Max nodded, watching Chrissy meander out her room, the door thudding shut.

Loose ginger curls fell over her shoulder as she leaned forward, studying the contents of Chrissy's bedside table. Her phone was one of the clear plastic ones, all the gadgets and wires on display. Beside it were a few discarded scrunchies and a clock radio painted with an obnoxiously bright yellow lacquer.

It was all effortlessly *her*, and Max couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy. She, too, was at a crossroads where her old self and her present self seemed to battle for dominance in her little space. She really wasn't sure who she even was now, but the tomboy who had shown up in Hawkins seemed to be fading bit by bit as she crept closer to her teenage years. There was no instruction book on how to consolidate the two. Her mom wasn't much help either, too caught up in the image of who she wanted Max to be to foster that exploration. She smiled dryly, thinking of how much her mom would *love* for her to have all this pink crap in her room.

She slipped off the bed, meandering towards the pastel green Sharp radio/cassette player on Chrissy's desk. Cassettes were scattered over the scuffed white paint of the wood, mostly bought from stores but a few seemed to be mixtapes scrawled with someone else's writing. Blue eyes traced the corkboard hanging above the mess, a collage of photo booth strips and polaroids featuring the brunette and various friends. The only one she could recognize was Steve, although he looked much younger and hair-heavy in them.

The door clicked open again. Max spun around, feeling a little guilty for snooping as a flush rose to her face. Chrissy didn't seem bothered by it, instead making her way over to join the redhead. She picked up a tape from the mess, popping open the cassette deck and pressing play.

"You like Duran Duran, right?" she asked, braiding her damp hair into a lazy plait. "Otherwise, feel free to pick something else out."

"No, they're cool," Max answered, watching as the older girl bopped

around her room, unbothered by the intrusion of someone she barely knew. It was as if Max had always been a fixture in her room.

“I’m still holding out for the day Simon Le Bon whisks me away to London,” she said wistfully, taking a magazine off the stack by her bed. “Seriously, what a dreamboat. I’d climb him like a tree.”

“Chrissy, ew,” Max said, her first laugh of the day rattling in her throat. It felt good, freeing.

“Sorry.” She flopped onto her bed, leafing through the Cosmo. The redhead joined her, leaning against the headboard as she tried to get a glimpse of the pages. “So, what do you wanna do? I can ask my mom for the car if you wanna get out of here.”

“Maybe later. This is nice.”

Chrissy shrugged. “Okay. I’m just warning you, I’m really boring.”

“You are not.” *Not even a chance.* If anything, she was the most interesting person outside of the Party that Max had met so far. Not that it was hard to be, with how bland the majority of this town was.

Chrissy looked up at her, giving the redhead a grin. “You wanna know what my big plans were today? I was gonna wax my legs and clean out my makeup drawer. Not exactly the pinnacle of interesting.”

“Why wax?” Max said, almost horrified. She’d heard girls screaming in the little nail salons that pocked the mall in San Diego as giant strips ripped off their legs. “Can’t you just... shave?”

“It stays smoother longer and you don’t miss spots if you wax.”

“Oh.” The need for smooth legs was kind of lost on her. Max’s hair was fine and barely noticeable. Hair was just hair, in her opinion. “That does sound kind of boring.”

“You wanna help me go through my makeup?” Chrissy asked tentatively. “You can take some of it, I’ve got a ton I don’t ever wear.”

“I-I guess.” Max gave a small frown. “I don’t really wear makeup. At all.”

“I can teach you, if you want.”

Chrissy was back up off the bed, pulling one of the drawers of her desk out, taking a bright white organizer out and hefting it over to the bed. With little care, she dumped it over, the contents spilling over onto her bedspread. She bounced back onto the mattress, sifting through the contents. It seemed at this point Max couldn’t say no if she tried, so she joined in looking through the pile of eyeshadows and blushes nearest to her.

“Why do you have so much if you don’t even wear it?” Max asked, picking up a shimmery purple.

“If you ask my stepdad, it’s because I have a hoarding problem,” Chrissy replied, setting aside a few lipstick tubes. “I personally think if you’re gonna paint your eyelids a different color, you might as well try every shade in the rainbow.”

“Your parents are divorced too?”

“Yep. Dad’s in Florida as of two years ago, which kind of blows. I can’t just go to Indy to get away from my mom for a weekend anymore.” The way she talked about it seemed so nonchalant. “I’m guessing your dad’s still in San Diego?”

“He’s in LA,” Max said, trying her best to sound just as casual.

“That’s kind of cool. I bet he’s seen a few celebrities.”

That was far from the truth. The part of Los Angeles he lived in was too seedy for anyone with money to even think of visiting, and he really didn’t go far outside his home turf. “He said he saw Charlie Sheen doing coke once on the hood of a limo.”

“Ew,” came the disgusted response.

She seemed to drop the conversation after that. For a bit, Chrissy had been singing along with the music, setting aside more of her makeup and tossing some over to Max to look at. Eventually, she handed Max

a small mirror, showing her how to apply eyeshadow without it smudging all over her face. It was the shimmery purple from before that she had taken a shine to.

Different, she thought. Not bad, just different.

The nicest thing was that she wasn't being treated like a doll. Her mom often only saw her as one when Max even bothered to ask for help with her hair or the rare instances of makeup. Chrissy seemed to enjoy actually teaching her, explaining the ins and outs of how to make her blue eyes pop or what lipstick shades went best with her complexion.

If she could trade Billy for Chrissy, she would in an instant. The only things he had taught Max was what not to say, how not to drive, who to avoid as she hit high school. Having an older sibling who could only teach you how to become the antithesis of who they were was tiring.

"Can I stay over tonight?" Max asked suddenly, setting down the mirror.

Chrissy had been putting back her makeup in all the little compartments of her organizer. Her eyes met Max's, that confused and concerned look back on her face. For a moment, she regretted even asking.

"You don't have anyone else you can stay by?" Chrissy asked back, sweeping her bangs out of her face. "I mean, you can if you want, but I'd think hanging out with one of your friends would be more fun than me."

"She's busy."

"Neil's not gonna have a cow if you don't come home?"

Max shook her head. "My mom said I just had to call if I was staying over somewhere."

The brunette's leg bounced a bit as she hesitated. "Okay. I need to talk to my mom real quick. Hang tight."

It was the nature of parenting during these times. You were allowed to do what you pleased to discipline your children. Anyone outside the family had no business telling you how to do so or try to stop you. Those truths tore at Chrissy as she explained to her mother in half truths why Max was staying over. She'd tried to reason the past few months that Neil was just a grade-A asshole, that Billy's insistence for finding a place of his own as soon as he could was just fierce independence.

Finally understanding, having everything *click*, sent her into a quiet panic. In the face of her helplessness in this situation, in Billy's and Max's, she couldn't do much more than put on a brave face. Keep being the Chrissy who made them laugh, who gave every ounce of her love even if it wasn't reciprocated outloud.

She shuffled back to her room, a sleeping bag under her arm. Max was leafing through one of her Cosmo's, jostling her foot in the air to the beat of Cyndi Lauper's bubbly voice. Chrissy pushed her bangs out of her face, tossing the bag to the floor.

"Strawberry Shortcake seems to be our only option for sleeping bags," she said apologetically. "My bed's a queen though, so if you're okay with potentially getting smacked in the face during the night, feel free to share."

"Or, you could take the sleeping bag," Max teased. Chrissy raised her eyebrows, giving her eyes a roll as she playfully pushes at Max's leg. "Sleeping bag's fine. Thanks."

Chrissy leaned over to check what Max was currently reading. It was one of those quizzes at the back of the magazine, this one surprisingly not about sex or boys but careers.

"So, what's the verdict?" she asked, crawling onto the bed. "They tell you you're perfect for Avon or something?"

“Pretty much,” came the slightly disgusted answer. “I know what I want to be when I’m older, anyway. I’m going back to Cali and becoming a pro-skateboarder.”

“You can make money doing that?”

“If you get sponsored, totally. I think I might be one of the first girls to go pro, if I work hard enough.”

“Hm,” Chrissy laid back on the quilt, looking at the popcorn ceiling. “That makes my plans seem kind of lame in comparison.”

“What’re you gonna do after you graduate, anyway?” Max asked, flipping back through the magazine to look at the outfits.

“Get a job. My grades kind of suck, so college isn’t in the cards.” She stretched, letting out a sigh as she crossed her legs. “I’m gonna move to the city once I save up so I can get a job as a flight attendant.”

“That’s not lame. You’d get to travel everywhere,” Max said, flipping on her back. “And you could live anywhere you want, there’s airports everywhere.”

“That’s the plan,” Chrissy grinned, turning her head to look at the redhead. “Go where the wind takes me.”

“You’d visit me, though, right?” Max’s voice sounded funny. “I’d want to hear about where you travel. And I’d miss you. So would Billy.”

“I’ll take you with me,” Chrissy said simply. “I’ll sneak you onboard with me in the back and you can have all the peanuts you want. Billy too.”

“He hates planes.”

“Then I’ll send him postcards and polaroids of us having a great time without his grumpy ass.”

That was enough to get a giggle out of Max.

“Chrissy?”

“What?”

There was a pause. “Don’t leave Hawkins just yet.”

Chrissy took a deep breath, holding it for far longer than she should have.

“I won’t.”

20. life's a beach

The day he had been dreading for the past month had arrived.

The tuxedo he had picked out with Susan's help felt like a costume. There had been back and forth between them, Billy pushing back at any choice she picked. His only criteria had been no coat tails, no ruffled shirts, and no stripes down the side of the slacks. She had somehow managed to pull every goddamn set in the store that had one or all of those things. A quick reminder that she was the one paying for it shut him up quickly.

The final selection had been a sleek black suit, complete with a deep red bowtie and matching cummerbund. It at least made him look more like a long haired James Bond than a complete idiot.

Not bad. He gave a once over on his look, futzing with his hair a bit more before standing straight. A small frown formed on his face, the feeling of a fully buttoned shirt foreign to him. He'd have to remedy that once they were actually inside the building. And if he could help it, he wouldn't be caught dead in something like this *ever* again.

As soon as he left the safety of his room, Susan was hovering over him, fixing his tie and straightening the cummerbund. Neil was outside mowing the lawn, completely divorcing himself from the circus inside. It was probably for the best. Any offhand comment from his old man would be enough to say fuck it to the whole thing. Max was sitting on the floral couch, fiddling with a Rubik's Cube while stealing glances at him with a smug smile.

"Oh, Billy, you clean up so nicely," Susan tutted, grabbing the camera on the coffee table. "I wish you would've gone with the dress shoes, though."

"You said if I wore the stupid cumberbund, I'd get to wear my boots," Billy said gruffly, sliding his hands in his pockets. It seemed to be the only concession she had allowed.

"I know, I know. Stand in the light, we have to get pictures. Your Aunt Lorraine is going to love this."

He blew out a sigh through his nose, eyes rolling as he shifted next to the fireplace. Max was trying to hold back her laughter, to no avail.

“What the fuck are you laughing at?” he shot at her, along with a dirty look. The redhead’s face hardened, flipping him the bird before going back to her puzzle.

“Billy, language.” The flash of the bulb caught him by surprise, eyes squinting. “Can you at least pose nicely, if you’re going to be a grump about this?”

He obliged for a bit. The attention was getting to him, frustration bubbling up in him. All he wanted was to get the hell out of here, away from the doting and the ridicule from the two gingers in his presence.

“Okay, that’s enough,” he finally snapped, grabbing his keys and aviators. “Chris is gonna kill me if I’m late picking her up.”

Susan was beaming despite his attitude, giving his tie one last straightening grasp before letting go. “Tell Mrs. DiMartino I’d like a few copies of her photos, please. And have a good time. One dance isn’t going to kill you.”

“It might,” he said under his breath.

The Camaro roared down the streets of Hawkins, which had become a true green oasis now that the vestiges of winter and grey snow had finally been driven out. All around were similar scenes; classmates being poked and prodded by their mothers to stand straight, girls in every color known to man walking down to their dates’ cars. Billy popped a stick of gum in his mouth, trying to keep the promise that he wouldn’t smoke, at least while his suit coat was on.

Wes was outside the DiMartino house, transplanting new flowers into the flowerbend on the side of the stairs. As the car came to a stop in front, he gave a glance and a wave before standing. Billy sighed,

taking care to remember the boxed corsage and to not to slam the door before making his way up the walkway.

“Afternoon, Billy,” Wes greeted, not bothering to tear himself from his project. It was for the best. Billy had managed to get back to a neutral standing with Chrissy’s stepfather, but trying to move towards being liked was a daunting task he dare not undertake.

“Hey, Mr. DiMartino.”

“Looking sharp. You clean up nicely.”

“Yeah,” Billy said, taking a deep breath. “That seems to be the thought of the day.”

The hovering started all over again the moment he stepped in her home. Patty was full of compliments, remarking how nice his perm had turned out. That may have been the worst bit—she had been at the tiny salon in Hawkins the same day he’d finally decided to bite the bullet and get a perm, despite the ridicule from Neil. She had at least spared him from a full blown conversation, only engaging in small talk before being ushered away to the shampoo bowl.

Chrissy was busying herself with throwing on a pair of slingback heels, watching the whole thing with an amused look on her face. Leave it to her to let him flounder in conversation with her parents. He shot her his best *‘For the love of GOD, help me’* look, only to get an eye roll back.

“Mom, quit it. You’re making him nervous,” she finally said, standing up to join Billy in the front room. The blonde shot daggers her direction, which she ignored. “Can you grab the camera? We’re kind of on a schedule.”

“She puts on a fancy dress and suddenly she’s queen of the house,” Patty deadpanned, giving her daughter a look. Chrissy only gave her a bratty grin. “Stay put, you two.”

As the older DiMartino woman walked to the kitchen area, Billy let out a sigh of relief.

“You like?” Chrissy asked, giving a half twirl to show off. Her dress

was the same scarlet as his accessories, a fitted sleeveless number that flared at her waist and fell just below the knee. It really did suit her. What caught his eye was the same thing that caught it every time. The singular moment where *Chrissy* and *Christina* overlapped, when the mask fell away and the girl was purely herself. He *adored* her and everything she was for in those few seconds.

“Looks way better on you than it did on the mannequin,” he grinned. That seemed enough to get a beaming smile out of the brunette.

“You look real handsome,” she said, wrapping her arms around his middle as her chin rested on his chest.

“I swear to god, if you tell me I ‘clean up nicely’, I’m going home right now.”

“Spazzoid.”

She snuck in a kiss before her mother came back in the room. The pushy instructions started again: telling them to stand straighter, now a silly one, stand closer, smile like you mean it. Somehow he felt less annoyed this time. Maybe his fight was just gone. After Patty was satisfied with the shots she had gotten, Chrissy hugged her goodbye and practically dragged Billy out the door.

He had to hand it to whoever was on the planning committee. The recreational center beside the library had been transformed to fit the theme they had chosen: *‘Life’s a Beach’*. It also made him want to laugh a bit, seeing the painstakingly painted backdrop of a shore that looked copied from a postcard. The sheer amount of beach balls and cardboard surfboards flanking the walls was an overwhelming reminder that he was stuck in bumfuck nowhere for another four months.

Chrissy snuck her hand in his, squeezing hard as if to say, *‘Chill out, it’s not that bad’*. He wished his body would wise the fuck up and listen instead of being so tense. She knew him too well at this point to see through his bravado and indifferent expression. This night was for her, and he’d be damned if he ruined it like he ruined her asking

him here in the first place.

“My man!” came a yell from the crowd at the edge of the dance floor. It was Jeremy, decked out in an awful grey suit and slicked back hair. “Everyone was wondering when you two were gonna show.”

“Well, we’re here now.” Billy shifted, sticking his hands in his trouser pockets. “You look like a corporate stooge, man. They run out of the good suits before you got there?”

Annette had trailed not far behind her date, giving out a squeal as she hugged Chrissy. The two chattered about each others’ dresses, bathing each other in compliments.

“You wouldn’t know fashion if it bit you in the ass,” Jeremy grinned, giving him a playful shove. “Hagan’s got some firewater on him, if you’re interested.”

“Thank fuckin’ god,” he muttered. Tommy, as big a pain in the ass as he could be, was probably going to be the only reason he’d actually loosen up tonight. He put a hand on Chrissy’s bare shoulder, giving her a peck on the cheek. “Be right back.”

All in all, the night was going smoothly so far. Billy had given his suit coat to the coat check and undone his bowtie, his shirt now open enough to get disapproving looks from the chaperones. Chrissy had an inkling that the flask Tommy had snuck in was a part of the blonde’s more lax attitude. She had coaxed one slow dance out of him already, and was waiting for the right time to pull him back up to the dance floor again.

At the current moment, Chrissy was sitting at an open table, strewn with fake tropical flowers and streamers. Billy had gone to get drinks for the two of them, but had gotten sidetracked by a group of boys from the basketball team. She didn’t mind much; he’d been attentive enough throughout the night, which had been a surprise in itself.

The streamer in front of her had been picked at, tiny shreds of the crepe paper falling from her manicured fingers. *We Belong* by Pat Benatar started to fill the room, prompting a soft hum under her breath to the melody. Just as she contemplated getting up and finding Annette, a hand pressed into hers, tugging gently. Chrissy's face screwed into confusion, looking into Billy's heavy-lidded baby blues.

"C'mon," he said, nodding towards the couples filtering to the dance floor. "You like this song, right?"

"Yeah," she answered slowly, letting him pull her up. "I'm just surprised you actually wanna dance."

"Just trying to keep in your good graces," Billy teased. His free hand slid around her waist, pulling her close as they began to sway.

"Mm, that's real romantic," she teased back, slipping her arms around his shoulders. He only rolled his eyes, the small grin on his face never faltering. Despite his deflection, she could tell he was enjoying the simple intimacy between them.

Whatever we deny or embrace, for worse or for better

We belong, we belong, we belong together

"You look really pretty," he murmured in her ear.

"Laying it on a little thick, Billy."

"I mean it."

The words seared through her, every synapse firing at once from his gentle tone. She felt her face grow hot; it seemed these moments between them served to fluster her more than wandering hands or the barely veiled dirty talk in front of their friends. Whoever this Billy was with his tender words, she was addicted to.

Have we become a habit?

Do we distort the facts?

Now there's no looking forward

Now there's no turning back

Instead of an answer, she leaned her head against his shoulder and let the sweeping chorus take her to a higher plane as they swayed. Every so often, his lips would grace her forehead or his hands on her waist would give a squeeze. The vestiges of the song drifted off into another slow song, couples filtering around them to trade places on the floor as they stayed in their embrace. She could've stayed there all night, if he let her.

The thing about prom was, no matter how good things were beforehand or how stable a relationship was, something was bound to go awry. Tonight was no exception.

Chrissy caught a glimpse of Carol making a beeline to the hall, the restroom door thrown open with a loud clang. She looked up at Billy, who looked just as confused as she imagined she did. Luckily for Carol, she hadn't been the first girl to storm to the bathroom that night and had avoided the group stares. Annette, with her hair piled high on her head and a spaghetti strap slipping from her shoulder, waded through the couples to them.

"Code Red," Annette said urgently, tapping Chrissy hard enough on the shoulder to make her wince. "We've got a woman down."

"Shit, really?" Chrissy groaned, arms slipping off Billy's shoulders. "I'm in the middle of something right now—"

"Chris, you owe her for Homecoming. Just fucking *help* me, okay? You know how hysterical she gets."

With another groan, she pried Billy's hands off her waist. He looked annoyed by the whole conversation, only vaguely understanding the implications of the secretive talk.

Code Red was the worst possible outcome of a dance: a breakup or a date cheating on you. Homecoming had been Chrissy's Code Red, and as much as she hated to admit it, Carol had been genuinely sweet about the whole thing as she bawled her eyes out in the parking lot

that night.

“I’m really sorry,” she apologized, giving the blonde boy a peck on the lips. “Just, um, go mingle or something. I’ll be out soon.”

“But—”

“She won’t, trust me,” Annette added, taking Chrissy by the wrist and dragging her away.

It had been a long five minutes since they had entered the women’s restroom. Annette was busying herself with talking to Carol through the metal door of a single stall while Chrissy leaned against the cool yellow tile, arms crossed. She’d taken to counting the tiles on the ceiling, hoping to pass the time until Carol got her stupid ass out of the stall to actually talk to them.

Shit, that was mean, Chrissy thought with a pang of guilt. Her patience and sympathy would be higher if her own dream moment hadn’t been shattered.

Annette shot the brunette a look, begging for reprieve from the crying girl locked in the stall. Chrissy rolled her eyes, the clack of her heels on tile giving a morose beat to the sobbing that echoed in the room.

“Carol, can you *please* get out of the stall?” the brunette asked, trying to keep any exasperation out of her voice. “It’d be a lot easier to talk to you out here.”

The sobs quieted to pathetic sniffling, toilet paper ripping from the holder before the lock came undone. The ginger was an absolute mess, puffy-eyed and eye makeup starting to run despite the waterproof claim on every mascara on the market now. Annette took over, thankfully laden with oceans more empathy than Chrissy could muster tonight. In a moment, Carol was crying into the blonde girl’s hug.

“He always does this,” Carol cried. “He lets his stupid friends make fun of me and just laughs along with them. He knows how

embarrassing it is for me. I'm done with him, I deserve better."

This was the, what, hundredth time Carol had declared she was moving on from Tommy? There were bound to be a hundred more before they finally either married each other out of convenience or left each other for good. It was a song and dance the whole school watched since seventh grade, but it didn't make Chrissy feel any less bad for Carol with the reasoning this time.

"Tommy's an asshole," Chrissy agreed, taking a few pieces of the paper towel from its holder. She scrunched them to hopefully soften them a bit before pressing one to the undereye of the crying girl. "Don't let him ruin your night, okay? Find a cute guy and dance with him. Dance with *us*, I'm sure we'll be more fun than any shithead in a suit."

"I'll dance with you all you want," Annette added, pulling away from Carol. "Jeremy fucking ditched me anyway, so I need someone to boogie with."

All the positive attention seemed to help. Carol was no longer crying, now just catching glimpses of her ruined makeup in the mirror. The Code Red had been successfully dealt with. Chrissy blew out a sigh, knowing the cleanup would be another story.

Billy was nearing his breaking point. He'd exhausted his ability to socialize with his teammates and was now sitting at a free table. He needed a cigarette. Maybe a couple of them. Prom hadn't been as bad as he had thought, but without his girl, it seemed pointless as hell to even stay. As he contemplated just walking up to the women's restroom and banging on the door to get Chrissy the hell out of there, Steve Harrington stopped in front of the otherwise empty table.

Fucking great. That cigarette sounded better and better as he tried to quell the residual feelings of muddled jealousy and annoyance.

“What?” The question was more snappy than he intended. Steve didn’t seem too bothered, which somehow bothered the blonde a little.

“Chris ditched you?” he asked, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“Nah,” Billy sighed, “her and Annette were babbling about a ‘Code Red’ or something. They’re in the bathroom.”

“Sounds, uh... serious?”

“Who fucking knows. Tommy and Jeremy left already. Kinda tempted to do the same.”

“I’m sure Chrissy would love that,” Steve muttered, pulling out a chair.

“The hell you say, Harrington?” Billy asked sharply, giving his best glare to the other boy. He was already pressing his luck taking a seat next to him, making smartass comments was not a wise way to keep his butt planted there.

“I said, Chrissy would *love* that.”

There was that fire Billy had heard so much about back in the dethroned King Steve’s eyes. It sent a tingle down his spine, unable to figure out if he wanted to commend him for talking back or punch him in the face again. He chose to just stay quiet for once.

Steve continued with a slight annoyance in his voice. “Lighten up, man. I got ditched by my date for her weirdo friends, and I figured it’d be less loser-ish for the two of us to sit together than alone.”

As much as Billy wanted to shoot back that he wasn’t a fucking loser, Steve had a point.

“You know, I don’t get it, Harrington,” Billy finally said, tongue peeking through his teeth. “Chris wouldn’t shut up about how important this was to her, but she’s spending her time in the bathroom with fucking *Carol* instead of dancing. We could be doing the exact same thing at a house party, and I wouldn’t have to wear a stupid suit. And I’d be drunk by now.”

“She’s a girl, man,” Steve sighed, running a hand through his perfectly coiffed hair. “It’s an excuse to put on a pretty dress and take pictures. They’ve done it since the camera was first invented. Chrissy isn’t any different, she just wants to look back and say she was there for the best part of high school.”

Billy snorted, leaning back in his chair. She certainly wasn’t immune to trying to hit all the notes to the teenage dream. Maybe that’s why this whole situation had made him so uncomfortable. She cared so much about being present through these high school experiences and having him be right there with him. It was just a sour reminder that she had pretended for months not to care along with him. Now he had to be just as present, just as involved, because if he didn’t, he’d be fucking up the only thing that made Hawkins tolerable.

“I’m surprised you’re actually here.” Steve paused before adding, “No offense.”

“Well, she cried when I said no.”

“Yeah, I heard.”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course you did. You and Annette are like her living fuckin’ diary. You know tonight’s the first time Annette’s talked to me in a month? Girl holds a grudge like no other.”

Steve’s laugh rang out, smothered only a few seconds later by a nervous cough as Billy gave him another glare. The two sat in silence, watching the array of colorful couples shift on and off the dance floor as peppy song started up.

“Just a warning though,” Steve said slowly, his tone more serious than before, “if you make her cry like that again, you’re gonna have a lot to answer for.”

“What, you’re saying you’re gonna beat the shit out of me, Harrington?” Billy said, giving a half grin.

Steve only stared at him before shrugging. “Worry less about me and more about Annette. That girl has a morbid fascination with the mob. She’d kill you and make it look like an accident.”

“Somehow, I don’t doubt that,” he muttered, eyes trained on the girl’s restroom door as it swung open. A sigh of relief blew through his nostrils, catching Chrissy’s gaze. She mimed shooting herself in the head as the two other girls walked ahead of her, prompting a smile out of him.

“Hey, handsome,” she chirped, bending over to give him a peck on the lips. “Miss me?”

“Barely,” he lied, giving a grin as he pulled her onto his lap. “Harrington’s been threatening me, so that’s kept me busy.”

“Wow, Stevie’s got some bite to him,” Annette teased, only to get a dirty look from Steve. “Where’s Jodie?”

“She left a while ago.”

“Yikes,” Carol said under her breath.

“Well,” the blonde girl continued, “Jeremy was a douche and ran off too. I wanna dance still, so Steve, get up and let’s go.”

Billy couldn’t help but let out a laugh at the confused look on Steve’s face as Annette pulled him off the chair, dooming him to a dance even as he protested. The weight on his lap lifted, his stomach sinking as Chrissy’s hands pulled on his own.

“You think you’re gonna get away with sitting here during a Kim Wilde song?” she mused, giving him a cheeky grin as he groaned. “Don’t think so, babe.”

At some point, you have to just say fuck it.

That was how the splintered group had ended up in the library parking lot, tired of the sub-par music choices and the general bad vibes left behind by the drama of the night. Coats and purses were strewn over the hoods of Billy and Steve’s cars, the smoke and stench

of weed slowly permeating the items. He had to give Harrington props for thinking ahead and tucking away a joint in his car.

“Did you see at all who got crowned prom king and queen?” Carol piped up.

“Who cares?” Chrissy said, smoke leaving her mouth in a plume as she handed over the spliff to Steve.

“It was probably Kyle B. and Cindy. Someone in my Home Ec class was saying it was *totally* rigged for them to win,” Carol continued.

Billy bit back the urge to tell her to shut the hell up. Now finally calmed by nicotine and a generous hit wrapping him in the sleepy euphoria, he had less bite to him. He leaned into Chrissy, resting his chin atop the plushness of her hair and let his hands fall prey to her own.

“What now?” Steve asked, passing the joint over to Carol. “Tina’s after party doesn’t start for like... an hour.”

“Diner’s still open,” Annette suggested.

“A burger sounds fucking awesome right now,” Billy muttered into Chrissy’s hair. She smiled, giving his hand a lazy kiss. He gave a grin, gripping her waist to hoist her up. The brunette gave a squeal, breaking into a fit of giggles as he swung her around to open the passenger door. “There’s no room for you ladies and your giant dresses in my car. We’ll meet you there.”

21. reach inside me

The front door clicked open, the loudest noise imaginable at that moment. It shouldn't have made her heart jump to her throat like it did; Chrissy was alone, and her parents knew she'd be getting home later than they'd be up.

Perhaps it was knowing that Billy was busy parking his car a bit farther down the street, making his way to the basement door. Or maybe that she'd have to figure out how to make sure he was out of the basement by morning. Either way, it shouldn't have made her this nervous, slipping down the stairs to open the back door like she had done a dozen times before.

"Hey," he said, leaning against the door frame with a lazy grin on his face.

"Hey yourself," Chrissy answered, opening the door wide.

No sooner had the door closed behind them, their bodies crashed into each other. Hurried kisses fell into slow, deep exchanges as their eyes tore over each other. Something in her told her to let this go slow, to drink up every last moment she could. There would not be another prom night. This was a memory she had to make sure to preserve until she was old and grey, whether Billy was still by her side or not.

He'd thankfully took the cummerbund off, making her job of undressing him as easy as possible. The pressed shirt, now wrinkled from the night, slid off his shoulders, plopping somewhere behind him as the blonde pushed her to the array of couches. Her hands flitted to his slacks, ready to let loose the bulge she'd noticed growing harder at the diner, no thanks to her hand's constant gravitation around his inner thigh. To Chrissy's surprise, he grabbed at her hands, pushing them away gently.

"Y'know, it'd be such a shame to take this off you right now," he commented, taking a handful of one of her breasts through the material of her dress. "I mean, you're never gonna wear it again after tonight. Might as well make it the fanciest dress you're ever gonna get eaten out in."

“Is that so?” she grinned, her lower lip toying between her teeth. “What about my wedding dress? You don’t think I’m gonna get eaten out in that?”

“If you do, I’m gonna make sure the only thing you end up thinking of is me,” he smirked against her lips. That was enough to send a wave of heat through her, nearly buckling her knees at the sheer cockiness in his voice.

Before she could retort, Billy was on his knees. A flush rose through her body, her face turning a shade of dark pink that she was thankful he couldn’t see in the dim light. If Billy knew what a rise he had gotten out of her already, there would be no end to the teasing.

Deft hands slid between the rustling crinoline of her petticoat, exploring up her thighs before stopping at a foreign object around her leg. Billy’s eyebrows shot up, before settling in a questioning look.

“I totally forgot,” she said sheepishly, lifting her leg to let him slide down the piece of fabric. In his hands was a garter, as scarlet as her dress with an off-white rim of lace sewn around both ends. “I was supposed to give that to you to wear on your arm or something. Mom didn’t really explain it well.”

Billy let out a low chuckle, rubbing the fabric between his fingers before sliding it up his bicep. “Cool.”

The crinkling of the underskirt began again, his hands pushing up both the underlayer and the dress around her thighs. Chrissy was suddenly aware of how cold the basement was, the air hitting her legs and the black thong that had quickly become soaked from his touch. Billy gripped the strings on her hips, sliding the thong down her legs until it was in his hand. He gave an amused smile, looking up at her as his head rested against her leg. His eyes looked nearly jet black in the dim light, almost ethereal.

“Another gift?” he teased. As soon as the thong had appeared, it disappeared into his back pocket.

“No,” Chrissy retorted, her face screwing into a frown. “Give those

back—”

She didn't have the chance to finish her thought. The tongue that seemed to spit poison as easily as it lavished affection was against her now. Toes curled as his bottom lip dragged against her folds, taking his time to let the pleasure of his tongue against her clit ripple through her before sucking softly on it. Chrissy's hands fumbled against the edge of the couch, gripping for dear life. Billy's hands steadied her legs, burying his face deeper against her.

She couldn't help but press her hips against him as she let out a whimper, already feeling overstimulated from his touch. He'd figured out, with more practice than she was willing to admit, how to drive her over the edge since that morning on his porch. It didn't take long for the familiar heat to overtake her,

“Billy,” she whined, raking her hand through sandy curls. He pulled his face away from her slick mound, those roguish eyes darting up to hers as he licked at his lips.

“What?”

“Fuck me.”

Her walls clenched in need, desperately aching for him to fill her. Billy stood, letting his hands meander to the zipper on her back, pulling it down with such purpose she shivered. The fabric fell to the floor in a scarlet heap, soon joined by his black slacks and boxers. Something about her felt so damn *needy*, so starved for him even though she'd had her fill only yesterday.

Her hands pushed against his chest, forcing him down on one of the couches. From the look on his face, he was surprised by her aggression, but how rock hard he was now told her a different story. Wordlessly, Chrissy climbed on top of the blonde, showering him with kisses until he gave a desperate groan against her lips.

She gyrated against his tip, lowering herself on him just enough to take the tip before resuming her seductive and maddening dance. Billy let out a grunt of frustration, his hands steadied on her hips, sinking into the plush flesh. With little effort, he pushed her down his

length, letting out a relieved sigh as she bit back a moan. Her eyes traced over his face, watching his heavy-lidded eyes trying to stay trained on her own. Her vision had finally adjusted fully to the dim light, watching his lips part wider as soft noises left him. As she slid off his cock again, he took advantage, pressing his mouth against her breast, letting his tongue slide up to her neck. Chrissy let out a moan, his hands guiding her back down his shaft to fill her again.

“I’m just gonna keep pushing you back down,” he warned softly, breath hitting her neck. She pulled away slightly, taking his face in her hand. He was all fire under that laid-back smile. Chrissy leaned back in, planting a deep kiss on his mouth, letting her teeth rake against his lip as she braced around his cock.

“Good,” she said against his lips, letting a bratty grin spread across her features as she lifted her hips again. Strong hands forced her back down on his cock, hitting her hard and deep enough to elicit a loud moan. If she cared more in this moment, she’d be worried about the possibility of being heard, but all that mattered was Billy’s hands on her hips and how impossibly deep he felt inside her.

“You okay?” he asked, letting his vice grip on her one of her hips go for a moment. She nodded as fingers swept a few waves from her face.

“Do it again,” she breathed.

He didn’t need to be asked twice. Billy’s hips bucked against her own as he pulled her hard down the length of his cock. Chrissy gripped the back of the couch hard, her other hand grabbing hold of the blonde’s wrist as the rhythm of their bodies picked up pace. She felt her whole body tense, the mounting release feeling like it threatened to crush her. Halting gasps turned into nearly guttural moans, the noises making their way out of her mouth in time with the bouncing of her tits.

One last moan made it from her lips before she came in a rush, the strength of her climax ripping through her, head to toe. Brown waves fell into her face as she rested her head against Billy’s shoulder, trying desperately to catch her breath and will her legs to solidify from the jelly they had become. In her haze, she felt Billy’s hands

move from her hips, one tracing her jaw as the other meandered to her ass.

“You want me to pull out?” he whispered, running a thumb against her cheek. Chrissy shook her head. Words were too fucking difficult to form right now. She was past the point of overstimulation, unable to feel anything but the residual tingling in her feet and amazement at how hard she had cum. The hand on her face settled back against her waist, pushing her down onto him in fast strokes. His fingers gripped at her skin as he came, giving an audible groan, though nowhere near as loud as she had been.

“You’re incredible,” he finally managed to say through puffs of breath. “Fucking incredible.”

They sat for a while longer, too utterly spent by their passion to move. Billy finally shifted her off of him, now too soft to be comfortable for either of them. He grabbed the box of tissues on the rickety side table, letting her clean up the mess that was currently dripping on to his own thigh. Chrissy couldn’t help but giggle at his annoyance. It didn’t take long till she was once again straddling him, exchanging soft, lazy kisses as he held her close. She sighed into the crook of his neck, letting the seconds hang in the air like stars.

“I love you,” she whispered to him, twirling a handful of curls in between her fingers.

The words didn’t sink in her chest like they had done before, instead keeping her afloat in the moment where she could easily drown in him. There was no resistance from him this time, no tension in his shoulders like the last time she’d told him. For a moment, she wondered if it was because she had worn him down. Something told her it was something bigger than that, that he had finally accepted and welcomed the words.

Chrissy decided to give it one last try. After tonight, if he answered with the same deference, she’d lock up her ‘I love yous’ and her desperation for him to admit it back in a tiny box in her heart. She’d stop pushing and hurting, let him come to her with time.

“Do you love me, Billy?”

He didn't say anything back. Arms just wrapped tighter around her torso, a hand roaming up her bare back to grip her shoulder. Steady breath hit her collarbone, a percussion of alternating warm breath and brisk air. Chrissy kissed into the side of his head; it seemed to stop him short, giving one sharp inhale as he clung to her.

At long last, his head nodded against her skin, releasing the breath he had been holding in.

Her breath hitched in her throat. There was no verbal follow up, no proclamations of love whispered. Just his face against her shoulder, eyes screwed so tightly shut that she could feel his expression. Part of her hoped he couldn't hear her heart thudding away in her chest, but the closeness made that seem unlikely.

He didn't need to say it back just yet. Knowing he felt brave enough to admit to her that he loved her was enough.

Light peeked through the small windows of the basement, the sun's early rays of the morning obscured only by the haphazard collection of furniture. Neither Chrissy or Billy stirred, wrapped in the throw blanket and each other's arms. Surrounded by a mountain of throw pillows on the carpet, the mess of blonde and brown locks swirled together as if it had always meant to be just so.

Soon, the DiMartino house would begin to stir. The pot of coffee and pancakes of a lazy Sunday would be made, the paper rustling open as Caitlin stole the funnies and Wes read the business section. Billy would be long gone, back to his own home where a similar scene would be taking place. Chrissy would creep down from her bedroom, her parents none the wiser to the events of last night.

But for now, they were entwined in an embrace that would take an army to pry apart.

22. playing with toy cars

MAY 22ND.

TAP TAP TAP TAP TAP.

He swore it was just part of his weird dream he was having. At first it seemed far off, the tapping deeper and more hollow. Billy shifted in his bed, pulling the sheet over his head in hope to fall back into his deep sleep.

TAP TAP TAP TAP TAP.

The noise was closer now, vibrating against the panels of his window closest to his head. With a frustrated groan, he pulled a pillow over his head. Whoever the fuck was there, it didn't matter. He was going to enjoy his post-graduation week by sleeping in as long as humanly possible.

It was not to be. His window slid open after a few tries, the rattle of his blinds mixing with Chrissy's grunts and several things from his nightstand clattering to the floor.

"*Go away, you freak,*" he yelled, voice muffled by the pillows surrounding his head.

He felt the full weight of her body colliding with his, giving a pained shout as she sat atop his back. An arm swatted at her, pushing her towards the wall and onto the mattress with ease. Chrissy only laughed, crumpling next to Billy as he flipped away from her.

"You break into my house and then you almost break my fuckin' back," he spat, trying to cover his head again. "What the hell's your problem?"

"Get up, it's almost noon already. I wanna show you something." Her words were peppered between kisses to his back and shoulder.

"Chris, I swear to god if it's something stupid, I'm gonna—"

"Gonna what?" she taunted, resting her chin on his shoulder. "Say

you're not gonna talk to me ever again and then cave after a day because you *missed* me?"

Christ, she was never gonna let him live that one down. It had been a stupid argument, one he knew he had no chance of winning, and his silence was a last ditch effort to gain some ground. He huffed, shifting around to get her chin out of the flesh of his shoulder. "Get off, you're hurting me."

"Hey, did you get the job?"

"Yeah," he grunted, trying to rub the sleep from his eyes with his palms. "I start this weekend. Which is why I'm trying to sleep in now, but *somebody* had to go and ruin that."

"Oh, boo-hoo," she shot back. "Get out of bed, it's important."

Billy shifted to look at her, eyebrows quirked as a small frown settled on his face. "What, you're gonna make me?"

"I'll push you out of bed if I have to."

"You and what muscles? I'm bigger than you." Before she could answer, Billy lazily rolled on top of her. If she wanted to be a brat, there were consequences, and those consequences just happened to be his entire body weight ragdolled across her.

"Get off!" she shrieked, laughter weaving through her words.

"Nah, you're a pretty comfy mattress," he grinned, pinning her arms so she wouldn't swat at him.

"Get off or I'll kick you in the dick."

"I'll kick you right back."

"Billy, get off m— are you *seriously* hard right now?" she asked in disbelief.

"You're surprised?" he asked back, finally sitting up enough to let her breathe properly. "I'm on top of a hot chick who's not wearing a bra. Kind of hard *not* to get turned on by that."

The fact that her face was beet red now didn't hurt either. Everything about her right now was a huge turn on, from the French braids falling past her shoulders to her slight resistance against his weight.

"Don't even try to tell me you're not hot and bothered right now," he smirked, dragging his hips against hers. "Bet if I stuck my hand down your shorts, you'd be soaking wet."

"You'd lose, I'm bone dry," she said, a frown puckering on her lips.

She was a good liar from the neck up, but the small push of her hips against his had not gone unnoticed. A small sigh hissed out his nose as he let go of one of her arms, pulling up the cotton of her shirt. She didn't make a move to stop him, instead watching him intently as his fingers rolled over a pink nipple. The way she squirmed from just that singular touch only served to fire him up more.

"Do I have to make you beg again?" he asked huskily, pinning her arm down again.

"I hate you."

"Bullshit." His mouth wrapped around her nipple, tongue swirling as he sucked hard enough to elicit a whine from Chrissy. "You love everything about me."

"Seriously, Billy, I have to be somewhere in a half hour," she mumbled. Conflict contorted her face, the desire to let him have his way fighting whatever she had on her agenda. "I don't have time."

"You can make time." He leaned back, shifting enough to undo the button on her shorts. Her hands grabbed his hard enough to warrant a questioning look from him to her.

"Billy, stop. I'm serious, I can't right now." Chrissy's face was serious despite the flush and obvious lust she was holding back.

He let go of her shorts, hands settling on top of his thighs as his lips pursed.

"That's some outfit for something so important," he said as he shifted off of the brunette. "What's the occasion, seeing your other

boyfriend?"

Chrissy rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I'm going to see my other boyfriend. I've got a very important appointment with his dick that I just *can't* miss. Can I show you what I came over here for? I have to leave soon."

"Fine, fine. Lady's got things to do, I get it." A steady stream of air left his nose as he tried to chase the raging lust from his body. *Think of dead puppies. Grandma. That one time you accidentally saw Susan naked.* He winced at the last thought. It at least seemed to do the trick. Billy reached over to grab a pair of discarded jeans, hopping into them as he followed Chrissy out to the living room.

Opening the front door, he finally understood why the brunette was buzzing with excitement. A yellow VW Bug was parked neatly behind his Camaro. He guessed it was a late 70s model, and whoever had detailed it did a damn good job. If it was one of the guys at the local garage, it was worth looking into for his own ride.

"Looks like someone got their graduation present."

"You like?" she asked cheerfully, hugging his side.

He couldn't help but feel a bit envious. Chris got a car, and what did he get? Freedom from the bullshit that had plagued twelve years of his life. A sentimental card from Susan and Max. Neil telling him he owed rent from now own, and if didn't like it, to get his own place. A sense of dread where optimism about the future should be.

Billy wasn't about to drag down her good spirits with his bullshit anxiety about life. He'd let her hear enough of his whining about his life during final exams when he was too tired to keep up the walls after she asked what was wrong. All he wanted was to be happy for her right now, to take some of that optimism she was bursting with in by osmosis. He flashed a smile, giving her a small kiss on the head. It seemed to melt her into him.

"It definitely suits you," he said, returning the hug.

"Thanks." Chrissy flashed a toothy smile. "You wanna come with to

the mall? I got a call from Spencer's about my application. We can get lunch after."

"I would but, um," he paused, letting go of her to lean against the doorframe. "I kind of can't go in the store."

"What did you do?" Her voice was resigned, lips pressing together in a line.

"You know how we were talking about the flavored lube they sell? Well, those suckers are *pricey*, and I thought I might just, y'know, take a couple to try out—"

"*Billy*—"

“— and I got banned from the one at Starcourt.”

"You *knew* I wanted the job there, why the hell did you—" She stopped, sighing as she covered her face with petite hands. A muffled yell left her, the only way of expressing how incredibly asinine she found him in the moment. "Nevermind. Just get in the car."

Three things about Chrissy and her car came to Billy's attention on the drive over. One, that the back seat lacked the room his Camaro offered for fooling around. Two, her tape collection sucked, meaning he'd have to stow some of his own music on the glove compartment. Three, that she was actually a pretty cautious driver. The last one hadn't crossed his mind, especially since he had driven them everywhere the past six months.

There was always something new about her to discover, little odds and ends that surprised him. She'd been a cheerleader her freshman year. How absolutely terrible she was at beer pong. Her astounding ability when remembering small details and dates. That she honestly, truly believed that ghosts existed. He loved her all the more for it, so much that it made him sick thinking about it.

No surprise, Starcourt was bustling, as it had been nearly every day since the opening. The two waded through the throngs of people, meandering past the food court. Billy caught a glimpse of Harrington in his stupid sailor outfit, pointing it out to Chrissy. She caught his attention and waved. Billy flipped him the bird, only to get one back from Steve and a smack on the arm from Chrissy as they got on the escalator.

"I promise, it'll only take a second," Chrissy said, standing on her tiptoes to give him a kiss. "If you wanna go to Sam Goody or something, I'll come find you."

"Nah, I can just wait out here." If it really was going to be a quick meeting with the managers, he could amuse himself for a few minutes. People watching could very easily fill the time.

"Suit yourself."

As soon as he had settled onto a bench in front of Spencer's, he knew why she had forgone a bra today. The two people interviewing her were men, both looking to be in their mid to late thirties. If there was one thing Chrissy did best, it was using what God had given her to get what she wanted.

He watched her play naive, giggling and flirting with the younger looking manager as he pushed paperwork in front of her, trying and failing not to look straight at her boobs. Something about the whole thing made him feel almost violently ill. The feeling only intensified as her laugh rang out again. The laugh that had always been *just* for him, that he had pulled from her hundreds of times. Every inch of him screamed to walk in there, to pull her out of the store so he didn't have to *think* about the possibility of sharing the way she laughed or cocked her head to the side with anyone else.

She needed the job, though. She *wanted* this specific job. It fit her, and to do anything to ruin something Chrissy wanted would kill him more than watching the blatant display happening. Billy turned his gaze upward at the skylights, hoping perhaps the refracting sun rays would burn his retinas out so he wouldn't have to see this ever again.

The rustling of a plastic bag brought him back to reality. Chrissy plopped next to him, eyebrows twitching into a silent question before pressing her lips to his cheek.

“I got the job!” she said in a sing-song voice. That freckled face of hers was beaming. Even though he still felt the vestiges of that ill feeling and a need to sock the mangers in the face, he managed to crack a smile.

“Congrats.”

“I also got you a little something with my new discount.”

She shoved the bag his way. Billy tentatively took a look inside. Among the Spencer’s branded shirts, most likely part of her uniform, were a few bottles of the lube that he’d gotten banned for. He let out a snort, tongue tracing his upper lip as he handed the bag back to her.

“Just be careful with those two,” he sighed, running a hand through a tangle of curls. “If they step out of line, you tell me.”

“I can take care of myself,” she smiled wryly. “You’re cute when you’re jealous.”

“I wasn’t *jealous*, those two are a couple of scumbags and if you’re not careful, they’re gonna take advantage of y—”

As he tried to explain himself, Chrissy’s mouth pressed against his, soft hands resting against his jaw. Instinct told him to pull away, that this was just a way to shut him up so she didn’t have to get the same spiel that Wes had probably given her a million times about Billy himself, but impulse and the feeling of her tongue snaking into his mouth won over.

“You know, they put a photo booth over by the theater,” she said as she pulled away from him. “It’d be a shame not to document today.”

Billy resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He let her take his hand, standing with a grunt to be dragged off to their destination.

No sooner had they settled into the booth and paid the machine,

Billy's hands roamed upwards to Chrissy's chest. The first flash from the machine came. Hands sunk into the soft flesh, raking his forefingers over clothed nipples. It didn't take much to excite them; the pink flesh hidden by her striped shirt soon pressed against the fabric and the pads of his fingers.

With a slow exhale, he rested his jaw on her shoulder, staring at her reflection in the small oval mirror as the second flash lit the box. Her bottom lip sank into her teeth, trying to hold back the little noises that rang in his ears. A grin flicked onto his lips before dragging them against her neck, sowing kisses in the soft skin.

"You gonna lie to me again and say you're not turned on?" he whispered.

The third flash came and went. Chestnut hair brushed against his head as she shook her head. His fingers left their place against the budding flesh. Chrissy gave a small whimper, though the injustice of his fingers abandoning their post was quickly remedied. He slid her shirt up, giving a soft squeeze before continuing the slow, maddening dance against the sensitive skin. The final flash of light filled the box.

"I think you forgot that these tits are for my eyes only now. And now I've got a little memento."

As he spoke, he gave a hard pinch to the rosy nipple in his hand. Chrissy let out a cry, quickly muffled by the clap of his hand over her mouth. A soft shush left his lips, pulling at the bud between his fingers as he traced his tongue down to the crook of her neck. Hips rolled against his lap and he couldn't help but press back against them.

"You want me to keep going?" he asked, voice sickly sweet in the way he *knows* will make her melt. It only served to evoke another thrust of her hips against him as he removed his hand from her face.

"Mhm," came the slightly meek answer.

"Then shut your mouth and face me."

Chrissy huffed, the flicker of a pout forming on her face as she shifted to straddle him. “You’re so *mean* .”

“You love it.”

His hands sunk back against her chest as he gave the brunette a whisper of a kiss, beckoning her to take it further. She took the invitation, searching for relief against his lips. His fingers kept at her nipples, flicking, pulling, pinching to find just the right combination to drive her crazy. Silently, he wished she had worn a skirt, anything to let him have her easily without arousing too much suspicion from the mall goers. Her face pressed against his shoulder, muffling the sounds trying to worm their way from her throat as he teased.

His other hand slid to her shorts, rubbing soft circles against the seam. It was enough to bring her over the edge, thighs pressing together against his hand. He felt it in the way her body stiffened against his, her fingernails driving themselves into his bicep so deep that half moon divots were left after she let go.

“Did you just come?” Billy asked, amusement lacing his words.

Chrissy didn’t answer. She seemed to shrink into him, breath ragged as she tried to regain composure.

“Hey, look at me,” he said, grabbing at the sides of her face. It was flushed a deep rose, her eyes unable to maintain contact with his blue ones. God, she was *embarrassed* . An emotion seldom seen, as Chrissy almost had no shame when it came to... anything really. Billy licked at his lips as the creased into a little smile, pulling her shirt down.

“Christ, you’re really cute, you know that?”

Chrissy pulled back the curtain, taking the photo strip from the machine with a frown. She handed the laminated paper to him, still blushing furiously. “And you’re an asshole. I wanted to *actually* take pictures, but enjoy your jack-off material.”

“I’ll cherish it for years to come,” he teased, folding the paper neatly and slipping it in his pocket. “If you really wanna take pictures that bad, we can steal Susan’s camera or something. I’ll take one of you

with your shiny new car and everything.”

The air filled with the shrill sound of cicadas and rustling leaves, the plethora of green swaying gently with the breeze. Susan’s camera lay atop the grass, full of the memories of the afternoon and blurred photos taken with the self-timer. Billy and Chrissy were sprawled out on his lawn, enjoying a cigarette and the last hours of full sun before dusk hit.

Laying in silence with someone had always been something that Billy had hated the thought of. He thought of silence in relationships as death, as a sign that things were too far gone or too played out to attempt to speak. This silence was different. Refreshing. It held a comfort, an understanding that physical closeness was enough.

“What if we just... don’t come back?” she said suddenly.

“Hmm?”

“What if we just stayed in California?”

Billy turned his head to look at Chrissy, who was already staring at him with hopeful eyes. Panic welled up inside him. This was *exactly* the sort of thing he had pleaded with her not to ask of him months ago. The thought had crossed his mind more than he’d like to admit. There were times he’d catch himself thinking of falling asleep next to her every night in a little place all their own, so near to the beach that the waves would lull them to sleep. Reality always crashed down on him. He couldn’t take care of her. He couldn’t trust himself to take her far away from everything she knew. Especially when there were shades of Neil lurking in him, never deep down enough to feel comfortable. He wouldn’t do that to her.

“Your parents would think I kidnapped you,” he joked, ignoring the rapid thumps in his chest. “I’m not going to jail because of you.”

"Well, you don't wanna come back here," Chrissy said, clicking her tongue. "And neither do I. If we can stay, we should stay."

"It doesn't matter what I want. I have to bring you back."

"It does matter!" she protested, propping herself up on her elbows in a huff. "Billy, I'm not gonna get stuck in this stupid town, and I don't want you to either."

"Drop it, Chris," he snapped. The way she flinched slightly hit him deep in the chest. "Can't you just be happy we're going at all?"

"Jesus, *fine*. Forget I said anything." She sat up, brushing stray blades of grass off her arms before standing. "You know what? I'm gonna go. Mom's making dinner soon."

He traced her movements, trying to get a read on exactly how mad she was. "Your shit's in my room, want me to grab it?"

"Nah." Hazel eyes met his, cheeks puffing out before blowing her bangs from her face. "I'll come grab it tomorrow. You still wanna go to Tommy's thing tomorrow?"

Mad, but not that mad. "Yeah, sure." Billy paused, grunting as he sat up. "You still want me to pick you up, or are you going to show off your new ride?"

That brought a smile to her face. "Pick me up. I like it when you play the gentleman."

23. there's no inbetweens

MAY 31ST.

It was the first concert he'd seen since he was dragged to the Midwest.

His whole being had yearned to be in a grungy club or an arena again, the pulse of the music ripping through him like a god through a prophet. Thankfully, he got just that with Ratt once he had settled somewhere in the middle of the general standing area.

He had come alone, not interested in having the experience taken away from by annoying friends. The realization that he had recently allowed him to root into Hawkins via the people around him was agitating. The more he let himself grow comfortable here, the harder it would be to leave it all behind, like he had always fucking intended. Besides, he enjoyed being alone in crowds.

The only problem was that halfway during the set, the woman pressed against his side by the rest of the crowd had kept making eyes at him. She was a pretty thing, reminded him a lot of Lita Ford. If he had any restraint, he would've just kept his eyes forward and focused on what he came for. The close proximity and the fact that he'd accidentally brushed against her tits at least twice now had worked its way into his brain, unable to focus.

She didn't seem able to focus on the music, either. She yelled over the loud riffs, asking if he wanted to go with to the concession area to get a beer. If he any impulse control in this moment, he would have said no. But, he followed her through the ocean of concert goers.

They didn't make it to the concession stand.

Before he could reason with himself, his mouth was against hers, taking hungry tastes of this new person who seemed just as ravenous for his touch. They barely managed to find a stairwell away from prying eyes before her body was against a wall, skirt bunched around

her waist, him pounding into her.

There had been a second he remembered the familiarity of chestnut waves and hazel eyes before lust had won out. For every smooth edge Chrissy was, this woman was sharp and jagged. She cut and hurt like a thousand tiny pieces of glass in his system. He almost *needed* her to tear apart his insides.

With every thrust into the stranger, he felt the familiar jagged edges cut back into his soul. The Billy Hargrove he had been, before Chrissy DiMartino had softened him and made him think of far off futures that could never happen, was always there. He was always ready to make a return with only the slightest push.

Self destruction was a comfort. The cost of climbing upwards was the risk of failure, and he'd rather settle on the lowest rung than fall from a great height. The sweetness that had engulfed his life was alive only on borrowed time.

It didn't matter right now what he felt. What mattered was getting his kicks with some whore he'd never see again, to learn a new body for a few minutes before leaving it in the past to be forgotten. He didn't care what made her tick, didn't give a fuck if she even came. Selfishness had enveloped him, and as he came and let her legs drop out of his arms, he knew its comfort would be hard to divorce himself from again.

"Do you still wanna get that beer?" she asked, pulling down the tight leather skirt.

"I'm good," he muttered, brushing curls out of his face. He didn't stick around to hear anymore, letting the metal door shut with a bang as he headed back to the concert.

As he stood far in the back, it dawned on him that the knot in his stomach was no longer from the excitement of seeing one of his favorite bands. It was a growing guilt, killing his desire to be here any longer. He'd managed to turn something he had looked forward to for weeks into a fucking waste of money and gas in a matter of minutes. Billy looked down at his watch; if he left now, he'd beat out the insane Indianapolis traffic.

Maybe another time, Ratt, he thought grimly.

The journey back to the parking garage to anyone watching the blonde would seem casual, disaffected as he always was. It wasn't until he found his car that everything cracked, and the anxiety that had slowly been consuming him since the last notes had hit his ears broke free.

"Fuck," he gritted, grabbing his keys out of his leather jacket. A few panicked breaths came and went, and with them, he screamed as loud as his lungs would allow. It echoed through the concrete structure, all the agony and remorse tearing through his throat as he kicked at the Camaro. His hands stopped their tremble long enough to open the driver's door, the slam echoing and melding with his scream outside.

"*FUCK!*" Billy yelled again, slamming his hands against the steering wheel. The start of hot, angry tears burned at his eyes, blurring his vision as he grit his teeth and swallowed hard. All he could think of in that instant was his father calling him a fucking *pussy* for crying, for not shoving down the guilt far enough to avoid falling apart over it in the first place. It didn't matter—tears spilled down his face no matter how much he willed them to fuck off.

Frantic thoughts swirled in his brain, mentally counting how much money he had on him right now. How far it would take him away from this hellhole so he could leave every last thing from the past eight months behind him.

Run away, like you always do.

Neil had wormed his way into every crevice, always in the back of his head spouting utter shit and unfortunate truths about him. He hated how right his father was this time.

He leaned back against the headrest, catching an unfortunate glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror. Bleary eyed and ashamed, too raw and real to ever be comfortable. Not even his reflection could stand looking at him, a deep anger building at the piece of shit looking back at him. Billy averted his gaze to the wall in front of him.

He'd be like stone, unreadable and unbreakable. Chrissy would never need to know about his colossal fuck up. One time wasn't a death sentence. And that's all this had been, a one time, giant lapse in judgement.

He'd messed up so many times when it came to her, it was a consistent shock she was still here. Perhaps because she was the one thing he could take from this place, the one thing he *wanted* to take with, Billy was deathly afraid to let her go.

With the palms of his hands, he wiped his face of the salty tears that seemed to cease for the moment. The moment he was home, he'd figure out how to move on. Tomorrow, he could be a thousand times better than he had been today.

God, he hoped he could be better.

That weekend proved him incredibly wrong.

It seemed to be one misstep after another. Mrs. Wheeler had shown up, most likely after hearing through the grapevine that he was on full display on the lifeguard chair; a free show for the price of the chaos at the community pool. She had just been a toy to play with while he waited for Max to say goodbye to her idiot friends, but he now felt brash enough to seek her out, to pay her compliments that made her flush like a goddamn schoolgirl. Whatever had happened at that concert had ripped him to shreds. Once the callous side of him had been let out, it felt impossible to shove it deep down.

And fucking *Heather*.

Heather Holloway, another of Hawkins' princesses, so perfectly put together with her stupid red bow in a cascade of curls. Heather, with her doe eyes and little beauty mark on the apple of her left cheek. He couldn't help but tease her, to shoot glances across the pool with a

cocky grin. Get just a little *too* close when punching in for a shift.

As he made his way to the reception area that Sunday to punch out, he couldn't help but give Heather a once over as she focused on the word puzzle book in her hand. She caught him looking, giving a small smile as her eyebrows raised.

"You heading out?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"With no shirt? How gauche."

"It's hot as hell today," he grinned. "Besides, figured I'd give one last show to those lucky enough to see these abs."

The sound of metal punching through cardstock mixed with Heather's giggles and the Top 40 station blaring from the desk radio. Billy couldn't help but lean over Heather's shoulder, staring at the word search as his cheek hovered mere inches from her own.

"You missed one." He reached a toned arm over, pointing to the word amongst the jumble of letters. "*Gardenia*. Right there."

"Thanks," she said, circling the word before turning her head towards his. Heat prickled in his chest, staring at pink lips before leaning in to steal a taste of them. She returned the gesture, not deeply, but enough for him to quickly realize he wanted to steal another at some point. Billy pulled away slowly, an amused smile playing on his face. Heather looked like she had just seen stars, the realization of what had just happened dawning on her face in an instant.

"I'm-I'm sorry," the other lifeguard apologized, flustered as she closed the puzzle book. She was apologizing to *him*? He resisted the urge to let out a chuckle.

Billy stood straight, resting his thumbs inside the hem of his pockets as a slight triumphant feeling swept over him. "No, no. It's cool."

"Aren't you still dating that one girl?" Heather asked, her words meek as her face. "What's her name? Christina?"

She fucking knew. It wasn't like it was a big secret in such a small town, who was steady with who. Part of him was annoyed with her feigned ignorance, her attempt to pretend she hadn't just indulged in what could be the start of a dangerous game.

"Does it really matter?" he challenged. His face went slack, eyes glinting. "You kissed back. So, even if I *am* with someone, you didn't care, did you?"

The look she gave was an attempt to make him feel bad for his cruel words. It didn't work. Billy only raised his eyebrows, looking at the people outside the reception desk flock in and out of the area.

He thought of Chrissy for a split second. Of how this impulsive bullshit he kept allowing to happen would eventually fuck everything up. He couldn't stop. It was intoxicating, numbing out the parts of his brain that had gone haywire with anxiety. If Heather wanted some part of this downward spiral, he wouldn't stop her. Part of him wanted to bring her down with him, anyway.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said, digging out his lighter and a cigarette.

She didn't answer, only huffing in that spoiled way little rich girls did. A hand reached out to the bow on the back of her head, flicking it as he left the area.

24. swallow truth like honey

JUNE 5TH.

Noise hit from every angle as Chrissy walked into the women's changing room. Young children and their mothers' coaxing voices, girls just a few years younger than her chattering away about banal things. She'd forgotten how chaotic the community pool was. For the past few years, Lover's Lake had been the place to go, the rope swing on a small ledge a source of amusement for her and her friends. But Billy was here, and she was dying to tease him about his little red swim trunks and the stupid mustache he had grown out.

She had convinced Annette to come along with the promise of a good tanning session and a sleepover that night. Being at the pool alone felt too dorky, and god forbid she had to talk to someone from their graduating class who had seen her at work stocking the back wall.

"I'm thinking an hour minimum," Annette said, pulling off her shorts and stuffing them into her bag. "If I'm gonna get to the perfect shade this summer, I need a headstart."

"What are you talking about?" Chrissy laughed. "You went hiking last weekend. You're already two shades darker than I am."

"I've got a total farmer's tan, it's so grody. I need to even it out."

"Whatever you say," she shrugged. "You need a hair tie?"

Annette nodded. Chrissy handed her one off her wrist, tying her own hair up in a loose ponytail.

"Did you see Zoe's a lifeguard?" Annette asked, throwing her hair up in a high bun. "I'm positive that girl can't swim to save her life. How's she gonna save someone else?"

"Apparently that's why they pair her up with Freddy on her watch." Chrissy shimmied out of her shorts, setting them on top of her other things before hoisting the bag on her shoulder. "Billy said he's pretty

sure she only got hired because she looks good in a swimsuit.”

The blonde girl let out a laugh. “In that case, they should’ve hired us instead.”

She rolled her eyes, a grin on her face. Her hand grabbed Annette’s, pulling it as she started to weave through the other locker room inhabitants. “Well, let’s make them regret not hiring us, then.”

The pool was twice as busy as the locker room. Shrieks and calls of ‘Marco Polo’ filled the air, the occasional shrill of a whistle ringing out. Billy wasn’t on watch yet, one of the other male lifeguards sitting atop the chair with a bored look on his face.

“So, where’s your boy-toy?” Annette piped up, throwing her beach towel over a free chair.

Chrissy shrugged as she settled on a chair next to the blonde. “No clue. I didn’t tell him I was coming by, so he might be busy doing actual work things.”

“Ooh, surprising your man at work, very cute.”

It was less an attempt to be cute and more the fact that Billy had been in one of his moods the last week. She chalked it up to something at work, the fact that their schedules kept them apart longer than planned, or his dad getting in his face. Whatever the reason, it bugged the hell out of her that he wouldn’t tell her what was wrong, instead getting progressively more snippy when she tried to pry.

“Hey, I’m gonna grab a soda, you want anything?” Chrissy asked suddenly, watching as Annette laid back onto the lounge chair.

“Nope, I’m peachy.” The blonde pulled her sunglasses over her eyes, letting out a contented sigh.

A few strands of hair escaped the confines of her ponytail as she glanced over the selection of beverages. The machine took the dollar bill, only to spit it out a few times. Chrissy pursed her lips, taking the bill out one more to rub it against the corner of the machine in hopes to smooth it out. The machine whirred as it finally accepted the money, the click of the large button and clank of metal falling to the open compartment filling the spaces between drifting conversations of the pool goers. Chrissy bent down, grabbing at the smooth can of cola.

A familiar deep laugh rang out, far enough away to know it wasn't directed towards her. It was unmistakably Billy, his laughter mixing with Heather Holloway's. At first listen, it was just two coworkers joking, but the way his voice lilted so sweetly and the way Heather responded was a sucker punch. A lump formed in her throat.

She slid the coin out of the change box, pushing them to her palm with too little grip in her haste. The coins clattered to the floor, a few dimes forever lost under the machine.

"Oh, *shit*," she muttered. Chrissy set the soda can down, scrambling to pick up her change so she could just go back to her chair and soak up the sun, pushing this from her mind.

"You okay, butterfingers?"

Chrissy looked to her right. There Billy Hargrove was, in all his sun-kissed glory, smirking at her with an arm leaned against the brick. He made no move to help her, instead taking in the sight of her in a swimsuit. It was a view he hadn't been presented with till this moment, and the way he stared made her a little flustered. She looked down, grabbing the last of the coins.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

As she stood, she noticed a new addition to Billy; a tattoo of a

smoking skull on his right shoulder. Eyebrows screwed together giving him a questioning look.

"You like?" He beamed as he shifted his arm towards her to give the brunette a better look.

"Badass," she said wryly. It really wasn't at the moment, the skin around the ink an irritated red while the lines scabbed over. "When did this happen?"

"Right after I went to see Ratt." Billy paused. "Guess I really haven't seen you since then."

She realized he was right. It wasn't only work schedules that had kept them apart; she'd been in Michigan for a couple days for the funeral of a great-aunt. Things were far more hectic than she had imagined this summer to be.

"Well, I'm here now."

"Dig the suit, by the way." He leaned in closer, the heat of his body radiating onto her. His hand traced the jewel-toned strap on her shoulder, thumb slipping under to give it a small snap. "Though, I'm kind of surprised you didn't go for something with a little more cleavage."

"You don't want anyone to see my boobs, and now you do. Make up your mind," she teased.

Billy gave a toothy grin, his face lit up as if he'd won a prize. His hands slid up to cup her face, pressing his lips against hers. In his kiss, she forgot the dread that had welled up in her. Whatever he had been talking about with Heather before didn't matter. Everything was as it should be in this moment, his focus on her alone, lips like manna to her hungry soul.

"Quit making out with your girlfriend and go do your job, Billy," a voice piped up from the door.

Chrissy's gaze followed the sound, eyes landing on one Heather Holloway, who was as displeased by the display of affection as she would be a hair out of place on her head. If both her hands hadn't

been full, she would have flipped the bitch off.

"I *am* doing my job. I'm giving a swimmer mouth-to-mouth," Billy smirked, shifting to sling an arm around Chrissy's shoulders. "Chris, this is Heather, who *apparently* would rather have me sitting on the chair than give some much needed CPR."

"Yeah, I know," she said curtly. "We've gone to the same school our whole lives."

"Weird! I thought you only started going here in high school." Heather tilted her head, her hand steadyng against her hip. "Did we ever have class together?"

Chrissy shot the other brunette an unamused glare. She honestly couldn't tell if she was trying to be a bitch or if she was just *that* stupid that she couldn't remember the dozens of classes they had together over the years. From the little she had interacted with Heather in the past, all she knew was that she lived in Loch Nora and she was a tattletale back in middle school. Thanks to her and a few other goody-goodys, Chrissy had gotten an in-school suspension for bringing a singular cigarette out at recess to try. She was almost sure nothing had changed with Heather's high and mighty attitude, and didn't really care to find out if she was wrong.

"Y'know, I'm not really sure," Chrissy answered, mirroring Heather's tone. She clicked her tongue, giving a sardonic smile. "And honestly, I don't really care. I'm gonna go work on my tan now. See you around, Heather."

She went up on her tiptoes to give a small kiss to Billy, who was holding back a grin, before turning on her heel to go back to her spot by the pool. As she left, the sound of his laugh rang out, cackling as Heather nagged him to take his watch.

The rest of their time at the pool was uneventful. Chrissy had caught Billy looking their direction a few times, sticking her tongue out at him as he looked over his sunglasses. Annette, to her dismay, had not evened out her tan quite as well as she had hoped; both of them had the start of sunburn on their faces and shoulders. Both girls had grown tired of their outing, and Family Video was calling their

name.

"You two heading out?" Billy called out as they packed up their things. Chrissy turned her head, surprised to see him down from the lifeguard chair and heading towards them at a leisurely pace. He pushed his aviators up to his wild mane, giving Chrissy a once over. At least he had the good grace not to mention the redness that had spread across the bridge of her nose.

"Mhm. Got a lot of nothing planned today, so gotta keep on schedule," she said, slipping her shorts over her swimsuit.

"I'm gonna take a smoke break, wanna join me?"

"Sure." Chrissy looked towards Annette, who was dawdling as she packed up her things.

"Go ahead, I have to use the restroom," Annette said, waving them away.

As she lifted her bag onto her shoulder, Billy's hand slipped into hers, giving it a squeeze before slinging his arm over her shoulder. She gave a small smile, a flush coloring her cheeks as she leaned her head into his chest.

Not a single cigarette was lit once they made it past the gate. Chrissy's body leaned into Billy's, arms wrapping around his bronzed shoulders as his hands steadied on her hips. Soft lips pressed against hers, enveloping her in a tingling warmth as they exchanged hurried kisses. She had missed this; even if it had barely been a week, it felt like a week too long without his touch.

"Is there any way I can convince you to ditch Annette for an hour after my shift?" he rasped. Those sleepy blue eyes traced over her face, a cheeky smile playing on his lips.

"Not a chance," she replied, a teasing smile of her own forming. "This is a girl's night. No boyfriends allowed."

He let out a little sigh, lips pursing. "What're you doing tomorrow, then?"

"Working. But," she added, noting the disappointment on Billy's face, "it's a closing shift, so we could hang out beforehand."

"Sure." His fingers toyed with a lock of her hair that had fallen from its messy ponytail. "I can take you and pick you up, if you want."

Chrissy nodded, giving him another deep kiss.

"If you two are gonna make me the third wheel, the least you can do is bum me a cigarette," Annette piped up from behind them.

Chrissy shot her a look, rolling her eyes as Billy held back a laugh. Her hands took his, removing them from her chest before picking up her bag.

"You're not a third wheel," she huffed, digging out the pack of Golds from one of the pockets. With a swift move, the pack flew from her hands to Annette's, who gave a shit-eating grin. "We should go, anyway. I'll see you tomorrow, Billy."

"Yeah," he said, lighting his own cigarette. "See you tomorrow."

Chrissy gave him a small wave as her friend grabbed her wrist, dragging her towards the yellow Bug. Billy smirked, giving a wink as he blew out a stream of smoke.

"He's acting weird," Annette said as Chrissy shut the driver's door.

Chrissy lit a cigarette, taking a long drag before turning the car on.
"What? How?"

"Are you kidding?" Annette gave her an incredulous look, flicking ash out the rolled-down window. "He was clinging to you the entire time. When has he ever been like that? Something's up."

"I don't know, Annette, maybe it's because we haven't seen each other in a week?" she deadpanned, pulling out of the parking lot.
"He's a weird guy, pretty sure that isn't a crime."

"If you say so."

"I do say so, drop it." The edge in her voice was unexpected. Now

that Annette had picked up on the strange energy, it only served to bring those doubts that had whispered in her head earlier to the forefront.

--

It only took a few minutes once they had settled into Chrissy's room for the space to look like a disaster zone. Magazines and tapes were strewn everywhere. Various spoils of a trip to Bradley's Big Buy littered the floor and desk. Annette was doing her nails on the carpet, surrounded by a bag of Doritos and several unopened Hostess snacks. Chrissy was busy leafing through a Merry-Go-Round catalog on her bed, bobbing along to the current tape. The scene was one that had occurred nearly every week for the past seven years, the plethora of Barbies and stuffed animals slowly giving way to more mature interests.

The phone rang, a shrill tone breaking through the sound of Lita Ford shredding on the guitar. Chrissy lazily reached out for her phone, unwilling to tear her eyes away from a blouse she had zeroed in on.

"Hello?" she asked, tucking the receiver between her shoulder and ear. Her face slowly screwed into a frown, letting out a sigh as the person on the other line continued to talk.

"Are you kidding me?" she whined into the phone. "Ugh, *fine*. I better get off for the 4th though. Yeah. Bye."

Annette barely looked up from her nails, which were now coated in a lime green lacquer. "What did they want?"

"Mitch is stuck in the city because the spazz can't keep track of time," Chrissy said, blowing a sigh out of her nose. "I have to go cover for a bit since it's busy hours."

"Seriously?"

"It'll only be two hours, tops," Chrissy promised. "You can come hang out at the mall until I'm done."

"Well, duh. I'm not hanging out with your mom for two hours by myself," Annette said, blowing on her nails.

It seemed like the longest two hours of her life. Chrissy's tolerance of the nonsense at work was at an all-time low. She'd yelled at the same kid no less than twice to stay away from the back wall, and kicked out a girl who had tried to snag a few earrings. Annette was thoroughly amused by it, leafing through a gag book and giggling while the brunette tried to keep some semblance of order in the store. Terry, her manager, had at least been okay with her friend keeping her company while he went through their new shipment in the back.

Just as she had finished pushing the overly curious kid out of the back for the third time, two familiar faces waltzed in. Tommy and Carol, stuck together like glue, his arm around her petite shoulders and her hands filled with shopping bags. Chrissy welcomed their presence. At least they were someone she knew wouldn't ask horribly inappropriate questions or steal from under her nose.

"Look who it is," Tommy said, a wide grin on his face. "The Princess of Starcourt and her lady-in-waiting."

"Hey, Tommy," Annette greeted, her voice devoid of any joy at his presence. The girl held a grudge better than anyone Chrissy knew. After prom, even after Tommy and Carol's subsequent reunion, she'd been extremely cold towards Tommy. Carol had tried to tell her to stop, but to no avail.

"You two look especially sunburnt today," he said.

"Yeah, well, blame Annette. She wanted to spend all the time at the pool tanning," Chrissy said, leaning on the counter. Annette only turned the page of her book, making tutting noises.

"You guys were at the pool?" Carol asked, slightly confused.

"I just said we were," Chrissy said back, giving Carol a slightly annoyed look. "Billy was working and I wanted to see him in action. Which, honestly, wasn't very exciting."

"Oh. So," Tommy said tentatively, "everything's okay with you two?"

"Why wouldn't they be okay?" Tommy didn't answer, instead glancing down at Carol. A well of fear rose in Chrissy's heart. "Tommy, why wouldn't things be okay?"

"Shit." Tommy's face fell. "Look, Chris, I'm sorry, man. If I knew you guys were still together, I would've said something sooner. Carol and I were there over the weekend and we... kind of saw him swapping spit with that prissy lifeguard. Can't remember her name for the life of me—"

"Heather."

Everything about today seemed to fall into place. It was a gut punch, one that knocked the wind straight out of her and chilled her entire being.

Carol gave her the start of a sympathetic look. Possibly the worst part was that it was *genuinely* sympathetic, not the normal bullshit she pulled. Tommy couldn't seem to figure out what to do, stuffing a hand in his pocket before looking down the aisles to the back.

"Carol, let's, uh, go check out some of the stuff in the back," he said awkwardly, pulling the redhead away. "We'll see you, Chris."

Annette had been silent the entire time, the waves of her perm falling on her face as she listened intently. Her brown eyes now focused on Chrissy, who could only look back with a pathetic glance as she held back the mix of feelings. Almost instantly, she was behind the register, wrapping Chrissy in a fierce, protective hug.

"I'm gonna kill him," the blonde girl said. "Seriously, he's dead-fucking-meat."

For a few seconds, it felt as if her body had forgotten how to breathe. All her concentration needed to focus on the previously involuntary action, and was unable to understand the words coming out of Annette's mouth.

"I, um." She took in a deep, purposeful breath, gingerly removing herself from the other girl's embrace. "I'm gonna go in back real

quick. I need to, um, talk to Terry.”

Annette nodded her head. “I’ll keep an eye on stuff up here for you.”

“Thanks.” The words didn’t even feel like they were her own, muffled and far away.

Her footsteps padded on the carpeted floor, dull in her ears. The metal door of the back room swung open. Another purposeful inhale, a shaky exhale. If she could just fucking *breathe* right now, things would be better.

Terry was on the floor, applying stickers to the mountain of gag gifts in front of him. He was only a few years older than her, one of the shift managers that she enjoyed working with due to his lax personality. His penchant for buying the morning shift workers coffee didn’t hurt either. Terry looked up at her, his face shifting from deep concentration to concern.

“Chrissy? You okay, bud?”

“No.” She was surprised how little her voice shook, the absence of a break in her tone. “I feel kind of woozy, is it okay if I head out?”

Terry hefted himself off the floor, blowing out air from pursed lips. “Yeah, I should be fine. Mitch called a bit ago and said he’s just got home. Tell your friend to drive you, okay? Can’t have my best opener crash.”

Chrissy nodded, tears beginning to prick at her eyes. “I will. Kick Mitch for me and tell him to show up on time tomorrow.”

She didn’t register what he said back. Chrissy waited for him to go up front before grabbing her purse from the cubby and letting the first wave of tears fall as she tried to steady her uneven breaths. With a gulp, she marched out to the storefront, grabbing Annette’s hand and wordlessly made her way to the parking lot.

Everything fell apart there.

It felt like the only thing keeping her from ripping apart at the seams with anger and hurt was Annette’s bear hug. As she cried, leaning

against the canary yellow metal of her car, she could only think of how much she wanted to hurt him back in this moment. No matter how small the hurt she could cause, she wanted to throw it back at him. Key his stupid car. Kick him straight in the dick. Nothing she could think of would be enough to mirror what she felt in that moment.

All she felt she could do, all she *wanted* to do, right now was scream.

25. past mending

She couldn't help but feel bad for Annette. The poor girl had dedicated the rest of the night to trying her best to talk up Chrissy, distract her from the crushing thought of Billy and Heather together in any sense. Chrissy had done her part to put it out of her mind and give her friend some reprieve. They had gotten high and sang so passionately to The Go-Go's that their voices had gone hoarse. Part of the night was spent making fun of the movies they had rented.

It was almost... normal. The realization dawned on her that this wasn't the first sleepover that had come on the cusp of some sort of boy fucking up royally. Not just for Chrissy, but for Annette as well. Chrissy hoped, in the twilight hours after Annette had dozed off, that this type of solidarity would never end between them.

The two of them had shuffled down to the kitchen mid-morning, Annette fully dressed while Chrissy had barely combed through the mass of brown waves. Annette had a family gathering to attend. Chrissy couldn't help but want to beg her to skip it, to stay another day while she skipped work.

The backup for when Billy would inevitably stop by her house would have kept her stalwart. She knew she couldn't ask that of Annette, nor of her mother and sister to have to pick up the pieces once an inevitable blow up occurred. Instead, she hugged the blonde girl as she left, promising to keep it together until Annette could return.

As she picked at a bowl of cereal, she silently chastised herself. The anger that beat in her veins was dampened by the new morning and a realization that the love she felt towards him hadn't disappeared. All she wanted was to hate him right now. Letting go wasn't as easy as it had been in the past.

She finished what she could stomach of her breakfast. As the empty bowl clattered in the sink, her mother gave a concerned look.

"Are you alright, baby?" she asked. Chrissy realized she must have looked terrible if her mother wasn't even mentioning leaving dishes around.

"Not feeling good," Chrissy said simply, trying to avoid her mother's gaze. "I think I might call out from work. I'm gonna go back to bed, okay?"

"Okay," her mother said, eyebrows raised as she gave Chrissy a once over. "You let me know if you need anything."

Smoke exhaled from his nose, drifting out the rolled down window of the Camaro. The summer breeze that swept through his hair was refreshing today, not unbearably humid like it had been. Perhaps it was a sign that today was a new start.

Yesterday, seeing Chrissy again, was like seeing his purpose once more. The week he had spent stealing kisses from Heather, throwing thinly veiled sexual remarks Mrs. Wheeler's way, it suddenly meant nothing again when she was near.

He hated it. Hated that he was acting like an animal with no object permanence. Hated the confusion in his own heart. He hated himself, most of all.

All the missteps and mistakes linked with one another, forming a chain of guilt that twisted itself around his ankles. He'd been dragging it along for days now, surprised no one had noticed. People didn't really look at him close enough, it seemed.

Billy flicked the end of his cigarette out the window as he pulled up to the DiMartino home, taking care not to let it fall near the lot line. Wes had gotten on his case a few times for the build up of butts on the curb. He had obliged the DiMartino patriarch; the cigarette butts were the neighbor's problem now.

As he waited for someone to answer the door, he heard happy shrieks from the backyard, Caitlin and a few of her friends. He didn't really talk to her much, preferring to keep his distance from the seven year old. The last conversation he had with the brat was about her missing

front tooth, which she proudly showed off him. He'd accidentally taught her the word 'badass' that day.

The door clicked open.

"Billy?" Patty asked, looking a tad confused by his presence. She let him inside. A pointed look was given; Billy took note and kicked off his engineer boots, lining them neatly with the rest of the shoes at the entrance.

"Hey, Patty." Chrissy's mom had insisted on being on a first name basis. It felt awkward as hell, but Billy obliged rather than be yelled at by another DiMartino woman. "Chrissy around?"

"She's upstairs," Patty said. "She's not feeling well and went back to sleep. Ask her if she needs anything, please?"

"Will do," he said, heading up the staircase.

The onslaught of pink was dulled by the drawn curtains in her room. He'd spent far less time in her bedroom than his own. It made him uncomfortable most days, his presence feeling like a stain on the purity of her childhood room. Chrissy never seemed to care, always eager to take him in whatever way she could to incorporate him into her world.

Chrissy was tangled in her blanket, chestnut hair splayed on the various sized pillows she surrounded herself in. Why she needed more than two pillows was beyond Billy. With how she seemed to sleep when alone, he suspected it was a preventive measure to keep her from rolling off her damn bed.

His hand gently reached out, nudging at the sleeping girl. "Chrissy. You alive?"

Chrissy's eyebrows knitted together, a murmur leaving her before her blanket went over her head and her body shifted away. He laid down next to the vaguely Chrissy-shaped lump. A small sigh filtered through his nose, pressing his chin against her shoulder.

"What?" came the muffled question, laced with sleep and a tiny bit of irritability.

"We were gonna hang out today, right?" Billy asked, lazily tracing the outline of her curves. She seemed to stiffen a bit at his touch. "Your mom said you weren't feeling good. You sick or something?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "I think I just overdid it last night."

"Poor thing," he murmured.

A deft hand roamed under her blanket, finding her breasts unencumbered by her usual frilly bras. He dragged a finger across her nipple, the skin pushing against the fabric of her shirt and his finger pad.

"Want me to make you feel better?" Billy asked, lips hovering against her ear.

A muted moan left Chrissy, the bits of sunlight peeking through the curtains cast over her parted lips. Her backside curved gently against his tightening jeans. Billy gave a small smile. His calloused fingers continued their teasing, Chrissy shuddering and whimpering from the swirling against her sensitive skin.

"You sure you're up to this?" Billy asked softly, brushing away the frizz of her bedhead from her face. "If you're sick, I'm not—"

"It's fine," Chrissy said, grabbing at his hand. She gave it a quick squeeze, bringing it to her lips. "I need you right now."

Something about the way she spoke rustled up the nagging guilt he'd tried to suppress. It took a moment too long for his composure to fully return, for lust to overtake the array of feelings tumbling in his head.

"I'll go slow," he whispered, undoing the button of his jeans. He shifted away from her for a moment, digging in her bedside drawer for the stash of colorful condoms she had stored away. She moved slowly against him, wiggling off and discarding a pair of pale blue panties that made his heart skip a beat. Everything about her seemed so delicate at the moment, and he wanted nothing more than to be a part of that.

With little fanfare, he slipped his erection between her legs. Her

slickness coated him before he slowly entered her with a soft groan. She responded with her own, muffled by an overstuffed pillow she'd pulled over her mouth. God, he had missed that noise. He'd missed every last bit of her he had memorized, every freckle, every gentle slope of her curvature. If he could stay like this, enveloped in her, maybe he wouldn't be so keen on ruining the things they had built.

He was *trying*. Trying so hard to show his love in this moment, to have her respond in the way she always had. The harder he tried, the more she seemed to slip away. She wanted him, her needy little noises as he thrust into her evidence of that. Everything else about her felt far away.

He turned her head to his, lips pressing a kiss into her own. There was no reciprocation to his affection. Frustration and guilt mixed with lust, a stew of complications that only served to make him want to leave this moment on some sort of high note.

A finger swept against her clit while he prayed for her release, for her to find her bliss in his arms. The familiar clench around him began as he rocked against her. He let out a soft groan into her shoulder, sandy curls mixing into her hair as she writhed against him. Her raspy whine as she came drove him to the edge. A hand steadied against her bare hip as he gave a few fast thrusts, a barely audible grunt leaving him as he came.

With a sigh, he wrapped his arms around her, pressing his forehead to smooth skin. For a moment, they were still connected, still a part of one another. Chrissy seemed to shiver, despite the warmth between them and the heat of summer. It was only after she made a sound that he understood.

She was crying. Not silently, but a shuddering weep that only betrayed how much she was trying to hide it.

He wanted to think he had gone too hard in the last few thrusts. That she was just too sensitive, too tired, to deal with the wash of hormones through her.

But he knew that she *knew*. That this had been a latch ditch effort on her part to salvage her feelings in the way they both knew best. Their

love had been written not in words, but in little gasps and the heat between their bodies. Now, it had no voice.

“Did I hurt you?” he croaked.

The rustle of her hair against his face as she nodded only served to tense him further.

“Yeah.”

Billy’s heart sank. Some part of him wished her bed would swallow him up, take him to the hell he deserved. He knew if she had asked, accused him here and now, he would have let it out. There wasn’t a bone in his body strong enough to admit his wrongdoings on his own, to force that confession upon her. Billy swallowed hard.

“Sorry,” he whispered, leaning his head against her shoulder.

For everything.

JUNE 9TH.

It was the end of a 6 hour shift, a constant flow of curious teenagers and college-age folks messing with products, moving stuff to other shelves, and trying to hit on her. Chrissy was exhausted. Sleeping the past few days had been difficult, the constant reminder of her world crumbling coming to her in Tommy’s voice.

It thankfully was a pleasant day, temperature wise. The walk from the mall to her little yellow Bug was far less arduous than most ends of her opening shifts. Chrissy dug out her keys from her small purse, the keys clacking against a wooden keychain she had bought at work.

As she glanced up, her face steeled, heart jumping to her throat.

There was the Camaro, parked a few spots away from her car. Leaned against it was Billy Fucking Hargrove, puffing away at a cigarette as he stared off into the sea of vehicles.

You have to be kidding me.

"What are you doing here?" Every bit of her voice was laced with weariness.

"I need to talk to you," he said grimly, flicking the butt of his cigarette on the ground. "And I can't exactly talk to you if you're avoiding me."

"Maybe I don't want to talk to you," she shot back.

Billy blew out a sigh. "I know that you know, okay? I just wanna cut the bullshit and talk to you."

For a few seconds, all she could hear was her own heartbeat. It was a sharp thumping, tattooing anxiety and a growing disdain on his heart.

"Chris, can we talk in the car?" His voice was desperate now.

"No," she said abruptly, looking straight ahead as she continued her march to her car.

A hand pushing into her arm stopped her in her tracks. Chrissy shot a glare at Billy, whose own face was far too vulnerable to be comfortable. His eyes had always been calming oceans, but all she could see now were tumultuous storms.

"Fine, but I'm not getting in *your* car," she finally said, wrestling her arm out of his loose grip. "C'mon."

The slight relief in his face made her feel ill all over again. She'd made her attempt to reconcile the hurt and the love that still lingered despite everything. Letting him in her bed, holding her as he brought about bliss wrapped in a shroud of heartbreak.

As soon as both doors had shut, Chrissy felt anger grow in her core. He was the one who wanted to talk, but was sitting there, quiet as

though her car rendered him mute.

"So, you did cheat on me?" she finally asked.

The words hung in the air, deafening and accusatory. He didn't answer.

"Did you screw Heather?" she tried again. Billy sat silent, eyebrows furrowed as he looked at his hands. Chrissy swallowed hard, righteous anger welling up in her chest. "Because I know you kissed her."

"No," he said back, tone unusually soft. "It wasn't Heather. There was... At the Ratt concert. I didn't know her."

It was a stone upon her chest, weighing her down as the blood seemed to run cold in her limbs. All at once, she couldn't breathe again, her throat so tight all that seemed to fit now was her heart, thumping away. She didn't know what hurt the most out of his confession; it all seemed to cut with such precision that it didn't matter.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" she asked angrily, looking at his now slumped frame. "You fucked some girl you didn't know, and that's somehow more okay?"

"It was a stupid mistake."

"A mistake," she repeated, face slack.

"Chris, it's eaten at me every fucking day since—"

"It must not eat at you that much," she said, cutting him off. "First some... some nobody, and then fucking *Heather*, of all people. You're a fucking pig."

With those last words, furious tears spilled down her face.

"Why did you do it?" she choked out, voice louder than she had meant it to be.

A terrible silence engulfed the two of them. Billy's lips became a thin

line, his face muddled with misery and irritation.

"You kept pushing, Chris," he finally said, voice tight. "You want all this shit from me that I didn't think I could give you."

"So it's *my* fault you cheated."

"I didn't—" Billy sighed, sniffling as he leaned his head back. "It's not your fault. It's fuckin' mine. I got... I don't know, I freaked out thinking about the future and just... *Fuck*. I don't know."

"Let me get this straight," she said slowly, wiping the mascara that was now collecting in a dithering ring around her under eye. "You decided to mess things up with me now because you were afraid to mess things up in the future? The fuck kind of logic is that?"

"The not very good kind," he said miserably. "I don't know how to explain it. I've been thinking about it constantly and it doesn't make any fucking sense to me either."

Chrissy was at a loss. No words came, no idea of how to respond. It all felt like too much.

"I'm sorry." His voice was barely above a rasping whisper, eyes trained on the little glass vase that hung above the radio.

"Why bother saying that? It doesn't help."

"Because I *am* sorry. I don't know what else you want me to say," he protested, blue eyes now clouded with his own tears. "I don't know how to fix this. I really want to, but I don't know how. I need you to tell me how I can, Chris."

Chrissy could feel anger well up again. How *dare* he think she had the answers to fixing his mistakes? Mending her wounded ego was already a daunting task, one she wasn't sure she could ever truly finish now knowing how deeply foolish she had been.

"I don't know how you can, either," Chrissy said, tone as stone-like as her face.

The answer seemed to hit him like a freight train. A sniffle and

ragged breaths filled the silence as he looked at her, eyebrows knitted in disbelief as tears threatened to escape. It only served to push more tears down her face.

“Chris, please, I love—”

“No,” she fumed. Her hands gripped at the steering wheel, her only hope to prevent them from throttling him in the moment. “How *dare* you try to say that now? It’s not a ‘get out of jail free’ card you can pull when you want. Especially if you don’t even mean it.”

Her fury was met with silence and those sad eyes, brimming with regret. They killed her, softened the anger just enough to feel the slightest bit of remorse for her words.

Chrissy thought of how easy it could be, taking him back. Live with the knowledge of his betrayal, only because fear told her she wouldn’t find anyone to love like him again. Go to California as planned, pushing down the self-doubt and distrust when he wasn’t by her side. See how long she could handle the constant paranoia till something broke down between them.

But she knew better. She was different than she used to be. There was a life for her beyond this town, beyond Billy Hargrove and the foolish fantasies she had woven around him. She deserved to have a chance at finding happiness that was hers alone, not tied to someone else’s presence.

“I don’t want to do this anymore, Billy,” she finally said, staring at the steering wheel as her heart thudded away in her ears.

“Christina, don’t—” Billy’s voice broke as tears finally broke loose, leaving glossy lines down his tanned face.

“Just get out of my car, Billy.”

The blonde sat there for a few moments, trying to steady his breath as Chrissy continued to stare forward, holding back a sob that was forming in her throat. All at once, the fight he had seem to give way to a burst of frustrated resignation. The passenger door flung open, a mess of blonde curls disappearing out of her peripheral. There was

hesitation, and then the door slammed shut.

Chrissy flinched as the sob finally let loose into her hands, the sound of the Camaro's engine trailing away.

Notes for the Chapter:

Part two [here](#)